Stockholm University

Lonely in Company

A qualitative study of loneliness, belonging, and the passion for recognition at work

Markus Oljemark

Doctoral Thesis in Business Administration at Stockholm University, Sweden 2023

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A qualitative study of loneliness, belonging, and the passion for recognition at work

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Abstract

Loneliness is a common experience in the workplace. Although one in two office workers reporting loneliness, the phenomenon has received little qualitative attention within management and organization theory. Previous research has sought to measure, predict, and control workplace loneliness, but how people experience and cope with loneliness at work is still relatively unexplored. While other emotional phenomena such as anger and stress have been scrutinized within qualitative workplace emotion literature, this body of research has yet to address loneliness specifically. Therefore, this thesis aims to generate new knowledge by investigating lived experiences of workplace loneliness. To this end, interview and survey materials have been collected from 45 Swedish knowledge workers who have personal experience of loneliness at work. A netnographic study of how people talk about workplace loneliness online complements the primary material. To understand how people experience and cope with workplace loneliness, I analyze the empirical material both narratively and thematically. This study suggests that workplace loneliness emerges as a paradoxical phenomenon with bilateral experiences and coping practices, which seem to derive from a tension between desired community and individuality at work. In particular, the empirical material indicates that workplace loneliness can manifest as both proximity-seeking behavior and social withdrawal. By drawing on recognition theories, this thesis seeks to advance a new perspective on workplace loneliness that makes sense of this tension. The proposed model suggests that workplace loneliness is not about being alone or feeling alone but about feeling unseen, unheard, and insignificant (i.e., unrecognized). Consequently, this thesis conceptualizes loneliness as a "passion for recognition" where "passion" is understood as a "strong desire" related to an individual's self-esteem. Next, I discuss the potential role of loneliness in the workplace and theorize that loneliness may facilitate both social order and social conflict in organizations via people's pursuit of recognition. This raises questions concerning the management and potential exploitation of loneliness in the workplace. However, more research is needed. Moreover, the findings of this thesis have implications for a set of current debates within workplace emotion literature. First, by approaching loneliness as an "abstract emotional phenomenon" (i.e., non-bodily expressed), this thesis contributes to the ongoing discussion on the interplay between expressed and experienced emotions at work. Second, the dichotomy between "positive" and "negative" workplace emotions is challenged by capturing loneliness as a nuanced and complex phenomenon. Third, the ethical dimension of belonging is brought to light by integrating workplace loneliness and workplace belonging research. Fourth, this thesis echoes and extends previously raised concerns about the consequences of unrealistic expectations in the workplace and how this may lead to feelings of meaninglessness, powerlessness, and loneliness in workers. Finally, this thesis aims to open new avenues for studying painful workplace experiences qualitatively, approaches that are not only helpful for advancing the academic debate but also relevant to the individual who lives through the experience.

Keywords: *Workplace, Loneliness, Belonging, Recognition, Qualitative Method, Work, Lonely.*

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Sammanfattning på Svenska

Ensamhet är en vanlig upplevelse på arbetsplatsen. Trots att en av två kontorsarbetare rapporterar upplevd ensamhet, har fenomenet fått begränsad kvalitativ uppmärksamhet inom management och organisationsteori. Tidigare forskning har försökt mäta, förutsäga, och kontrollera arbetsplatsrelaterad ensamhet, men hur människor upplever och hanterar ensamhet på jobbet är fortfarande relativt outforskat. Andra känslomässiga fenomen som ilska och stress har granskats inom kvalitativ arbetsplatskänslolitteratur (workplace emotion literature), men denna forskning har ännu inte adresserat ensamhet specifikt. Därför syftar denna avhandling till att generera ny kunskap genom att undersöka levda erfarenheter av ensamhet på arbetsplatsen. För detta ändamål har intervju och enkätmaterial samlats in från 45 svenska kunskapsarbetare som har personlig erfarenhet av ensamhet på jobbet. En netnografisk studie av hur människor diskuterar ensamhet på arbetsplatsen online kompletterar det primära materialet. För att förstå hur människor upplever och hanterar ensamhet på arbetsplatsen analyserar jag det empiriska materialet både narrativt och tematiskt. Denna studie föreslår att ensamhet på arbetsplatsen framträder som ett paradoxalt fenomen med bilaterala erfarenheter och hanteringspraxis, vilka verkar härstamma från en spänning mellan önskad gemenskap och individualitet på jobbet. I synnerhet indikerar det empiriska materialet att ensamhet på arbetsplatsen kan manifestera som både närhetssökande beteende och socialt tillbakadragande. Genom att dra nytta av erkännandeteorier (recognition theories) söker denna avhandling att främja ett nytt perspektiv på arbetsplatsrelaterad ensamhet som ger mening åt denna spänning. Den föreslagna modellen antyder att arbetsplatsrelaterad ensamhet inte handlar om att vara ensam (själv) utan om att känna sig osedd, ohörd, och obetydlig. Följaktligen konceptualiserar denna avhandling ensamhet som en ”passion för erkännande” där ”passion” förstås som en ”stark önskan” relaterad till en individs självkänsla. Därefter diskuterar jag ensamhetens potentiella roll på arbetsplatsen och teoretiserar att ensamhet kan bidra till både social ordning och social konflikt inom organisationer via människors strävan efter erkännande. Dock krävs mer forskning. Dessutom har avhandlingens resultat konsekvenser för en rad aktuella debatter inom arbetsplatskänslolitteraturen. För det första bidrar denna avhandling till den pågående diskussionen om samspelet mellan uttryckta och upplevda känslor på arbetsplatsen genom att närma sig ensamhet som ett ”abstrakt emotionellt fenomen” (dvs. icke-kroppsligt uttryckt). För det andra utmanas dikotomin mellan ”positiva” och ”negativa” arbetsplatskänslor genom att fånga ensamhet som ett nyanserat och komplext fenomen. För det tredje belyses den etiska dimensionen av tillhörighet (och gemenskap) genom att integrera forskning om ensamhet och tillhörighet på arbetsplatsen. För det fjärde ekar denna avhandling och utvidgar tidigare framförd oro för konsekvenserna av orealistiska förväntningar på arbetsplatsen och hur detta kan leda till känslor av meningslöshet, maktlöshet, och ensamhet hos arbetare. Slutligen syftar denna avhandling till att öppna nya vägar för att kvalitativt studera smärtsamma arbetsplatserfarenheter, metoder som inte bara är hjälpsamma för att främja den akademiska debatten utan också relevanta för den individ som lever genom upplevelsen.

Foreword – On Becoming "Doctor Loneliness"

As many who have pursued a PhD can attest, writing a dissertation is often lonely work. For me, this loneliness stems not only from the solitary nature of writing but also from the strange role of being a PhD candidate. Like academic adolescents, we stand with our feet in two worlds, sometimes uncertain of where we belong. But unlike the child who inevitably matures and enters the camaraderie of adulthood, we must actively prove ourselves to complete our academic metamorphosis. While this is an honorable trial, it can also be daunting. It has stirred feelings of inadequacy and inferiority within me, making me struggle to feel like a valuable member of my organization. I have doubted my competence and the significance of my work, and many times questioned whether it is worth completing this thesis, fearing that few will read it or find it interesting. These thoughts breed anxiety, causing me to become defensive, which makes me hide my work and myself from others. When overwhelmed by these feelings, I may appear arrogant and self-assured, but the reality is far from it. My insecurities and loneliness manifest as a persona I do not want to be, and I yearn for a context that brings out the best in me.

At the start of the PhD program, I was part of a group of doctoral students whose company I greatly enjoyed. I cherish the experiences I have shared with these talented and inspiring individuals. However, as time passed and we matured into researchers with our own agendas, ideologies, and scholarly allies and adversaries, I felt the gap between us grew, and with it, I gradually withdrew. The once strong pull that bound us together weakened until little of it remained. This is not a reflection of any shortcomings on their part, rather it is a product of my personal journey and internal struggles. As I write this foreword, I reflect on the past three years spent working from my apartment, maintaining minimal contact with anyone beyond family. Initially, I attributed this to Covid-19, but when quarantine ended, I still could not bring myself to return to the office. It became evident that the issue was not external but within me. As months and years passed, my isolation solidified, and the prospect of reintegration seemed insurmountable. This pull had not only vanished but been replaced by a repulsive force. Thinking about going to the office felt akin to standing on the ledge of a diving platform: I want to jump, but my body resists. Instead, I sit at home, fantasizing about the sense of community others enjoy in the office. And I envy them because I want nothing more than to belong somewhere and feel valued. But I also know what price I would have to pay to be a part of that togetherness. And I hesitate. This unresolved desire manifests a gnawing sensation in my chest, urging me to act but leaving me paralyzed, unsure which direction to take. Occasionally, this makes me feel so lost and so lonely.

In the end, I am (forthcoming) "Doctor Loneliness," both literally and symbolically. Writing a thesis on loneliness has been a double-edged sword. The topic has occupied my thoughts incessantly, even disrupting my sleep. However, writing about loneliness has also been cathartic, allowing me to thoroughly process my emotions and experiences. This journey has taught me much about myself – my desires, needs, and fears. Through this, I have come to realize that while I find the experience of loneliness painful, I am grateful for the capacity to feel lonely, as it helps me understand who I am. Putting these thoughts into words makes me self-conscious, but I do not think I should be embarrassed. If there is one thing that I hope

readers take away from this thesis, it is that it is okay to be lonely. Loneliness, like grief and depression, is a natural part of life. More importantly, our capacity to feel lonely speaks to something fundamental about us as human beings. Arguably, only a creature capable of loneliness can truly appreciate togetherness. So perhaps, instead of avoiding loneliness, we should confront it, learn from it, and become more attuned to it. That is exactly what this thesis is about: it explores how loneliness moves through individuals and organizations alike, not as an inherently negative phenomenon but as a force that influences both our experiences and behaviors. With this, I hope that my work will contribute to a broader conversation on the topic of workplace loneliness, encouraging others to reflect on their own experiences and fostering greater understanding and compassion within organizations and communities.

Stockholm, January 2023

Contents

1. Introduction

Loneliness has been a topic of concern lately. Books, articles, and podcasts are seemingly everywhere about the perils (but also beauty) of loneliness and social isolation. While loneliness has puzzled philosophers and psychologists throughout the 20th century (e.g., Buber, 1942/2005; Riesman, 1950/2001; Slater, 1970/2006; Weiss, 1973), the scholarly attraction to loneliness has grown notably over the past decade.[1] A group of scholars who have been particularly influential on this reinvigorated interest is Holt-Lunstad and colleagues, who found a correlation between social isolation and increased mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Elaborating on this, they argued that loneliness is as dangerous as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and more dangerous than obesity (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). In a world where people live increasingly unsocial lives (see Putnam, 2001), this sounds like bad news. And so, with the ambition to prevent humankind from perishing from loneliness, op-ed columnists have been working hard to inform the public about the hazards of this affliction: "Loneliness Is a Silent Killer" in *HuffPost* (Winch, 2013); "Loneliness is killing us – we must start treating this disease" in *The Guardian* (Perry, 2014); "The Loneliness Epidemic" in Forbes (Howe, 2019); and in *The New York Times* Kristof (2019) urges America to band together and wage war on this common enemy: a silent, deadly, and contagious enemy that requires a national defense response. Clearly, these articles paint a depressing picture of contemporary society.[2] Moreover, as Cambridge Economics Professor Noreena Hertz (2020) suggests, the 21st century may be the age of loneliness, and it is potentially a murderous time to be alive.

On the deadliness of loneliness, the columnists above are not necessarily wrong: more recent research has confirmed the correlation between chronic loneliness and mortality (e.g., Steptoe et al., 2013; Valtorta et al., 2016). The causal relationship appears to be hardened arteries due to elevated stress levels (Hackett et al., 2012) and decreased self-regulation toward healthy behavior (Hawkley et al., 2009). Other health implications associated with loneliness are Alzheimer's Disease (Wilson et al., 2007), reduced quality of sleep (Cacioppo et al., 2002), impaired mental health (Griffin, 2010), and increased suicidal ideation and suicidal behavior (Rudatsikira et al., 2007; Stravynski & Boyer, 2001; McClelland et al., 2020). The latter is particularly alarming considering that US suicide rates have surged since the turn of the century. As of 2019, suicide was the second leading cause of death in age

[1] The relative prevalence of the term "loneliness" in published books has nearly doubled since the turn of the century (see Google Ngram viewer: "loneliness"), and more than 50% of all academic entries on loneliness have been published after 2010 (see Google Scholar: "loneliness").

[2] This is a small sample of the journalism on loneliness. *The Guardian* has over 46,000 articles related to loneliness, most highlighting the dangers of this affliction and asking whether it can be cured by a pill (see Carney, 2020).

groups 15–24 and 25–34 (CDC, 2019).[3] Here, men make up most of the victims; uncoincidentally, young solitary men have become the poster child of contemporary loneliness.[4] Another group that is associated with the loneliness epidemic is the elderly: single seniors and widows, who, when themselves pass, may lay undiscovered for months.[5]

One thing these two groups have in common is that they are largely jobless. Men between the ages of 20 and 34 have the highest unemployment rates of all adult age groups in the US (BLS, 2021), and seniors are metaphorically dead to the labor market (not counting presidents). Therefore, a potential link between unemployment, loneliness, and declining health may be assumed, and this is a serious concern for politicians, not only in the US.[6] Getting people into jobs is a tried-and-true political solution to a wide range of social, economic, and individual problems. This makes sense: as communal life in western societies has declined (see Putnam, 2001), the workplace has remained a relatively stable social arena in many people's lives. Work usually offers a place to interact with like-minded people and a context to sense belonging. In a society oriented around labor, being jobless often equals social exclusion. Work could, therefore, be proposed as the cure for the loneliness epidemic as it forces people out of isolation. Unfortunately, the picture is more complex. Workers seem to be just as lonely as the unemployed: workplace wellbeing surveys unanimously demonstrate high levels of loneliness in office workers. In a study by Cigna (2020), 60% of workers reported loneliness. In a similar survey by Gallup (2020), 54% of respondents experienced workplace loneliness. Another study of almost 30,000 Chinese white-collar workers found that 53% of the participants struggled with loneliness (Zhaopin, 2018). These numbers are perplexing. How can so many office workers be lonely in company? To answer this question, we must address what we mean by loneliness.

[3] In 2019, suicide was also the leading cause of death among 15–44-year-olds in Sweden (SCB, 2019). That said, Swedish suicide rates have declined over the past four decades (KI, 2020). However, as other forms of premature death are effectively prevented, suicide remains the leading cause.

[4] For example, the number of men who identify as incels (involuntary celibates) has increased dramatically over the past decade. Many of these men spend much of their time online rather than in the real world. Not only is this a particularly lonely group of people, but also potentially dangerous as misogynist, racist, and pro-violence sympathies germinate in online incel communities.

[5] In 2022, a Swedish man from Norrköping was found dead in his apartment after laying dead for four years. While this is an extreme case, it is not exceptionally rare that old people lay dead in their apartments for weeks or months. Original Swedish article: https://omni.se/man-tros-ha-legat-dod-i-norrkoping-i-flera-ar/a/a7QV22

[6] For example, the Swedish Minister of Labor associated unemployment with social exclusion and decline of solidarity (see Nordmark, 2021). In 2015, the former Swedish Minister of Education (*Kunskapslyftsminister*) claimed that the single most important task of the government at the time was to combat unemployment in young people (see Hadzialic, 2015). Here, a strong link is made between employment, social membership, and wellbeing (both individual and collective).

First, the English language makes an important distinction between different forms of isolation. Here, aloneness is typically understood as the condition of being alone, and this can sometimes be painful, a sentiment reflected in Publilius Syrus's poetry (50BC/2017): "Solitude is the mother of anxieties." Being alone may cause stress and angst, because, when isolated, people are confronted with their own minds. When suffering from isolation, any form of company could offer a distraction from painful worries and woes. But this situation is not necessarily what is meant by loneliness. While journalists sometimes make aloneness synonymous with loneliness, this is a mistake as the conflation of these two terms neglects that some people may thrive in isolation while others may feel painfully lonely in a group. When addressing this pressing issue, scholars approach loneliness as a subjective feeling or emotion (see Wright, 2005). That said, loneliness is not just the feeling of being alone, but perhaps better understood as a social pain that arises when there is a mismatch between an individual's social needs and the social environment (Cacioppo, 2009). Contrary to common belief, research suggests that loneliness has no apparent correlation with isolation (ibid) or the number of friends a person has (Clark et al., 2015). Neuroscientists have even found that people experience social pain more intensely in the vicinity of others (see Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010: 224, Cutrona, 1982; Russell et al., 1980). Leading loneliness researchers have consequently argued that interventions aimed at increasing social interaction are misguided and potentially harmful to the individual (Weiss, 1973; Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999; Cacioppo et al., 2015). To better understand loneliness, therefore, requires a shift of attention from voluntary and involuntary hermits to those who feel lonely when they are together. Here, studying loneliness in the workplace offers a unique opportunity.

In the workplace, people come together, yet many feel painfully lonely. Despite this fact, management and organization scholars have largely overlooked the phenomenon in the past. Most of the research on workplace loneliness is instead found in industrial psychology and ergonomics, and this research has only really taken off in the past decade (see Firoz et al., 2020). Regardless of discipline, previous research on workplace loneliness is narrow in methodology and theory: the vast majority is positivist and quantitative (ibid). This body of literature has sought to measure and predict loneliness in the workplace: what causes it and how it affects organizational performance (e.g., Ozcelik & Barsade, 2011, 2018; Peng et al., 2017; Yilmaz, 2008). But to quantitatively study a fuzzy phenomenon like loneliness, it must be operationalized into something tangible. Consequently, proxies such as emotional deprivation have been developed (see Wright, 2005) for loneliness. But in doing so, loneliness's subjective (and existential[7]) aspect often

[7] In this thesis, I use the word "existential" to point to the individual's subjective experience and relationship with herself (i.e., existing as a being). This includes thoughts about life, death, and purpose, which may produce feelings such as anxiety, fear, and hopelessness.

gets downplayed. Loneliness once again becomes associated with measurable factors, such as the frequency of social interaction and the number of friends (see Russell, 1996).

A research tradition that takes the complex and existential aspects of work seriously is emotion in organizations (also known as emotions in the workplace and workplace emotion). In this body of literature, scholars challenge the assertion that emotions have quantifiable correlations to organizational performance indicators and are instead concerned with what role emotions play in the workplace, both for the individual and the group (e.g., Fineman & Gabriel, 1996; Fisher & Ashkanasy, 2000). In line with this, a wide range of workplace emotions have been investigated conceptually and qualitatively, including anger, (Fitness, 2000; Gibson & Callister, 2010; Stickney & Geddes, 2016; Gabriel & Lindebaum, 2016; Lindebaum & Geddes, 2018), fear (Fitness, 2008; Kish-Gephart et al., 2009), shame (Poulson, 1999; Orr, 2003; Bentley, 2012), guilt (Pei et al., 2020; Miranda et al., 2020), envy (Vidaillet, 2008; Duffy et al., 2021), melancholy (Johnsen, 2008, 2009), boredom (Johnsen, 2011, 2016; Costas & Kärreman, 2016), and grief (Hazen, 2008). This literature has sought to understand the roles that various emotional phenomena play in the workplace. Despite this ambitious endeavor, very little qualitative and theoretical attention has been dedicated to workplace loneliness (see Firoz et al., 2020). This lack of attention is surprising considering the recent findings that loneliness is an exceedingly common phenomenon in the workplace (Gallup, 2020; Cigna, 2020; Zhaopin, 2018).

Although quantitative workplace loneliness studies are valuable for grasping the magnitude of the problem, the operationalization of loneliness into measurable proxies is arguably not helpful if we want to understand the depth and nuances of the phenomenon. That is, using proxies could discourage scholars from approaching loneliness as a subjective and existential experience. The same may be said about the hyperbolic emphasis on the expansion and lethality of loneliness in mass media. When the public discussion on loneliness is confined to the chronically and severely lonely, the everyday kind of loneliness becomes overshadowed. An analogy would be to associate sadness only with the depressed. Loneliness consequently becomes exotic to "regular" people's lives and is framed as an illness requiring political intervention or medical treatment (e.g., Carney, 2020). This view potentially increases the stigma around loneliness and breeds psychological distance from the phenomenon. Meanwhile, the high prevalence of loneliness among office workers shows that people, who, in the eyes of society, are functional individuals, regularly experience this feeling. What this kind of loneliness means to them and their peers and how it manifests in the workplace (and society) are seriously overlooked in contemporary research. Therefore, a more nuanced perspective of workplace loneliness is warranted, a perspective that captures the

paradoxical yet intelligent emotional processes that individuals bring with them to work.

Research Aim and Outline

Since the turn of the century, industrial psychologists and management scholars have become increasingly concerned with workplace loneliness and its adverse effects on organizational performance (e.g., Wright, 2005; Yilmaz, 2008; Ozcelik & Barsade, 2011). Although this literature does much to shed light on loneliness in organizations, especially on the cause and effect of the phenomenon, it has not gone to great lengths to explore lived experiences of those who report loneliness in the workplace. This lack of qualitative studies impedes the academic progress on workplace loneliness (see Wright & Silard, 2021: 1075). Hence, there is a pressing need to find new ways to study loneliness at work. Therefore, my aim is to investigate what experiences and organizational behavior people associate with the phenomenon. Through this, I also intend to explore the potential role of loneliness in organizations. Specifically, I seek to answer the following three research questions.

- How do people experience workplace loneliness?
- How do people cope with workplace loneliness?
- Why do people feel lonely at work?

With the first question, I am interested in how loneliness moves through individuals, both their bodies and their minds. By more profoundly exploring experiences of workplace loneliness, I hope to unravel details and nuances that previous research might have missed. Since I may not be able to observe loneliness as it is lived, I aim to capture how people make sense of the experience retrospectively. This leads me to the second question, an investigation that provides insights into how people respond to feelings of workplace loneliness, both cognitively and behaviorally. By addressing this empirically, I aspire to extend previous loneliness research with a perspective on how loneliness can manifest in organizations through attitudes and actions. While all three questions have both theoretical and empirical aspects, I recognize the third question as more explanatory. That is, my goal is not to identify causal relationships between organizational elements and workplace loneliness (i.e., what causes workplace loneliness) but to explore the antecedents that could explain why people experience loneliness in the workplace. With this question, I aim to ground workplace loneliness in theory, which is an endeavor few previous studies have attempted (Firoz et al., 2020). In developing this theory, I will also provide a new conceptual framework for understanding (workplace) loneliness, which represents a key contribution of this thesis. This theoretical and conceptual groundwork will pave

the way for future workplace loneliness research, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative approaches. That said, the main objective of this thesis is to draw loneliness at work out of the shadows – not with numbers but with stories and descriptions of lived experiences. That is, I aim to deal with a wide range of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that people associate with loneliness in the workplace. By engaging with this material, I seek to demonstrate not only how loneliness research can expand and advance workplace emotion literature but also how it is relevant to broader organization theory as it calls attention to people's dialectical relation to communion and individuality.

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This dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter 1 introduces the research problem and questions as well as the relevant terminology, concepts, and perspectives on loneliness. Chapter 2 delves into previous research with two main goals: to establish a knowledge base in relevant organization and management literature that this thesis uses, and to identify gaps and opportunities for contributions to this field, highlighting areas that warrant further exploration. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework used to make sense of the empirical material and answer the research questions. In Chapter 4, the metatheoretical assumptions and research process are discussed, providing transparency and justification for the methodological choices made throughout the study. Chapter 5 focuses on the analysis of the empirical material to address the experience and coping mechanisms of workplace loneliness, offering insights into how individuals navigate and make sense of their feelings of loneliness at work. Chapter 6 employs the theoretical framework to explain why people experience loneliness in the workplace, delving into potential antecedents and situational factors that may contribute to these feelings. Chapter 7 provides a discussion and conclusions, including implications of the findings for both theory and practice, and addresses the limitations of the theoretical and methodological approaches used in this thesis, acknowledging potential shortcomings and suggesting avenues for future research. Having outlined the dissertation's structure, I will now provide a brief review of loneliness as a phenomenon to serve as a conceptual point of departure before delving into relevant previous research.

Conceptualizing Loneliness

Although quantitative psychology dominates contemporary loneliness research (see Firoz et al., 2020), the phenomenon has historically attracted a range of philosophers, political theorists, and biologists. This widespread academic interest points to loneliness being a relevant concept to many disciplines, but it also means that perspectives on loneliness are diverse and, at times, even conflicting. For

example, while neuroscientists see loneliness as a social pain that has evolved to protect the individual from the dangers of isolation (see Cacioppo, 2009), existentialist philosophers contend any purpose of loneliness and instead frame it as an inescapable existential solipsism (Moustakas, 1961/2016; Mijuskovic, 2012).[8] While this may be seen as an irreconcilable conflict between the "function" and "appearance" (experience) of loneliness, in between these two epistemological antipodes, contemporary psychologists are beginning to categorize loneliness as an emotion (Gibson, 2000; Wright, 2005; Silard & Wright, 2022).

By approaching loneliness as an emotion, scholars go beyond the mind-body dualism and inquire into all the physiological, experiential, cognitive, and behavioral activities that may be associated with the phenomenon (Sønderby, 2013; Stein & Tuval-Maschiach; 2015). Moreover, this perspective emphasizes that loneliness is not "just" a feeling as it manifests both consciously and subconsciously (see Peplau & Perlman, 1979).[9] More importantly, the emotional perspective points to loneliness having some social function (role) beyond the individual (see Parkinson, 1996), although the individual may construct her subjective meaning of the experience independently from this. In the context of workplace loneliness, both the role and experience of loneliness are uncharted territory and may hold important insights for management and organization theory. As this perspective is aligned with qualitative emotion in organization literature (e.g., Fineman, 2000), it offers a sound conceptual foundation for my research. Therefore, I approach loneliness as an emotional phenomenon. That said, conceptualizing loneliness as an emotion is not entirely unproblematic as emotion is a relatively recent concept and remains a contested term among academics (Barrett, 2006a; Panksepp & Watt, 2011). When referring to loneliness as an emotion, it is, therefore, necessary to also consider what is meant by emotion.

Before the 19th century, what is today called emotion was typically referred to as affections, passions,[10] and appetites by both philosophers and theologians (e.g.,

[8] Note that Moustakas (1961) and Mijuskovic (2012) did not refer to loneliness as "existential solipsism," but this is my interpretation of their conceptualization.

[9] To elaborate on this distinction, most academics understand "feeling" as a subjective and conscious experience (APA, 2022). These can be somatic (e.g., dizziness, tiredness, or heat) or more existential (e.g., the feeling of being lost). Either way, the feeling primarily exists cognitively. According to the constructivist perspective, emotions have associated feelings (e.g., the feeling of anger); this also implies that one can be angry without consciously recognizing the anger. Similarly, people are sometimes moved by hunger (and appetite) without actively recognizing this experience or feeling.

[10] In the Century Dictionary, passions and affections are distinguished as follows: "the distinctive mark of passion is that it masters the mind, so that the person becomes seemingly its subject or its passive instrument, while an affection, through moving, affecting, or influencing one, still leaves him his self-control." In other words, the difference is that affections are voluntary and passions are involuntary movements.

Aquinas, 1485/1993; Descartes, 1649/2017; cf. Dixon, 2003: 39, 2012).[11] As passion has mystical and religious connotations (e.g., Passion of Christ), it is believed that emotion emerged from the ambition to secularize psychology and reconcile it with biology (Dixon, 2003: 4-5). Here, the works of William James (1884) and Charles Darwin (1872), to a great extent, defined how emotions came to be viewed in academia and clinical psychology throughout the 20th century (Dixon, 2003): as a communication system with mainly a social function (e.g., Shariff & Tracy, 2011; Van Kleef, 2009). According to this perspective, emotions make internal states public through bodily movements such as facial expression, gesturing, posture, vocalization, and pitch of the voice (Sauter, 2010; Barbalet, 1998), but they also help individuals make sense of their environments (see Hochschild, 1979/2012). Today, this model has been expanded and challenged (e.g., Barrett, 2006a), but the socially expressive dimension of emotions remains a central aspect of popular models (e.g., Solomon, 2003). This calls attention to the conceptualization of loneliness as an emotion since loneliness does not appear to have a distinct social (bodily) expression (Prinz, 2003).

Addressing this, loneliness has been referred to as a "disembodied emotion" distinct from bodily expressive emotions such as happiness, anger, and sadness (Prinz, 2003; Harré, 1986).[12] "Abstract emotion" is another term that has been used for emotional phenomena without clear bodily manifestations, such as love, envy, and boredom (e.g., Johnsen, 2016), but this term is not academically established, nor has it been applied to loneliness. Instead, it is more common for loneliness researchers to describe loneliness as a "complex emotion" (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2005) or an "emotional cluster" (Bound-Alberti, 2019) composed of multiple emotional and sub-emotional processes.[13] Within the field of emotional psychology, this approach is known as the Theory of Constructed Emotion, which emerged as a counterreaction to the essentialist (naturalist) model of emotion (Barrett, 2006a; Barrett et al., 2007). Whereas the essentialist emotion perspective suggests that emotions are universal and discrete neurological processes (e.g., Darwin, 1872; Tomkins, 1962/1992; Izard et al., 1993), critics of this view argue that scientists have yet to provide proof or consistent criteria for any basic emotion (Barrett, 2006a). Moving away from the idea of discrete emotions, the theory of

[11] In *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes (1649/2017) lists wonder, pride, love, desire, anxiety, despair, courage, remorse, envy, gratitude, and shame all as passions (p. 17–19). As the title suggests, Descartes believes these passions belong to the soul.

[12] In this piece, Prinz (2003) notes that it may be tempting to refer to loneliness as a "disembodied" emotion because it lacks bodily expression; however, Prinz also points out that loneliness is still very much an embodied phenomenon (including physical experience).

[13] Approaching loneliness from this perspective, Bound-Alberti (2019) argue that loneliness is not a single state but constructed from a range of emotional experiences, including sadness, anxiety, and anger as well as desire, jealousy, resentment, and disappointment (pp. 176–177, 185). This points to the paradoxical nature of loneliness experiences and problematizes any essentialist view of the phenomenon.

constructed emotion instead considers emotion as an act of learned categorization (ibid). From this perspective, emotions are a cluster of activities that are recognized as a particular emotion based individual and cultural scripts. With this conceptualization, the constructed emotion model addresses the ambiguous relationship between experienced and expressed emotion by suggesting that they follow two distinct categorization processes. On one end, people categorize their own emotions based on what they feel, and others' emotions based on what they see, even though there is supposedly little relationship between the two (Barrett, 2006b). This disconnect between experienced and expressed emotion is sometimes referred to as the "emotion paradox" (ibid) and is something that complicates much emotion research (see Prinz, 2003: 3-6, 2010). To address this paradox, emotion scholars may have to choose between studying either the expression or the experience of emotion. Opting for the introspective approach, this thesis investigates the phenomenon from the individual's perspective. That is, my interpretations focus on how people subjectively categorize loneliness, not on some external criteria.[14]

Although the constructed emotions perspective effectively addresses some of the complexities of emotion by being inclusive, it potentially also waters down the concept. Because, whereas the essentialist model lists a fixed set of "basic emotions" (e.g., Tomkins, 1962/1992), the alternative approach allows almost any experience to be categorized as an emotion. This can be problematic, as concepts are arguably made relevant by their boundaries. Harshly put: if anything can be an emotion, the concept of emotion has no meaning. That said, regardless of whether loneliness is conceptualized as a kind of emotion or something else, it is clearly associated with emotional phenomena (see Clore & Ortony, 2013) and the relevance of workplace emotion literature to this thesis remains intact. Still, for the purpose of my study, I have chosen to align myself with the constructed emotions perspective as this offers a productive way to approach loneliness as a multifaceted phenomenon. But I also recognize that this approach comes with implications for my research aim and questions. In particular, I need to consider how loneliness as a social (or subjective) construct without clear boundaries can fulfill any role in organizations. I discuss this and other epistemological assumptions later in this thesis.

This concludes my conceptual point of departure for this study. In short, I approach loneliness as a constructed emotional phenomenon with limited expressive capacity. From now on, I will use the term "abstract emotion" to denote such emotional phenomena, although this view will be progressively challenged and developed throughout this thesis. An extended review of what is an emotion can be

[14] This approach would mean to study sadness based on the individual's self-report of feelings of sadness rather than based on whether they appear sad (e.g., crying).

found in the appendix, where I also review terminology such as affect, mood, and personality.

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In this chapter, I have introduced the research problem, my research aims and goals, as well as the main terminology and relevant perspectives. This forms the initial boundaries for my study and paves the way for the literature review. An important takeaway here is that I wholeheartedly commit to the distinction between loneliness and aloneness. To capitalize on this, I intend to study loneliness where people are not alone – i.e., in the office. I also do not see loneliness as merely the feeling of being alone. Rather, I approach loneliness as an emotional phenomenon that can manifest experientially, cognitively, and behaviorally. This approach resonates with the theory of constructed emotion. Although I sympathize with the idea of loneliness as an emotion, I re-evaluate this position throughout the thesis. Moreover, my goal with this thesis is to advance the knowledge concerning workplace loneliness both empirically and theoretically. By studying an emotional phenomenon that has been overlooked in previous qualitative management research, I hope to contribute to the broader literature on emotions, experiences, and behavior in the workplace.

2. Previous Research

Over the past decade, workplace loneliness has become a popular area of study (Firoz et al., 2020). This burgeoning interest is part of a broader academic movement that seeks to understand the intricate roles that emotions and feelings play within organizations (Bolton, 2004). In this body of literature, emotions are typically perceived as key signals that must not be ignored (e.g., Hochschild, 1979/2012). Yet, this perspective has not always been the norm. Throughout the 20th century, management and organization theorists often portrayed emotions as unstable and disruptive elements best kept out of the workplace (e.g., Taylor, 1911/2014; Fayol, 1916/1987; Weber, 1922/2013).[15] This belief was also widely held among psychologists of the era (e.g., Marston, 1928; Young, 1943/2013). However, there were dissenters. For example, management scholar Elton Mayo (1930) criticizes the dehumanizing perspectives in classical management literature and formulated a more compassionate organizational theory.

Contrary to the view of workers as lazy creatures driven solely by monetary rewards, Mayo (1930) suggests that "high production occurs when the worker is in a 'steady state' when he is not only working but also maintaining his organic equilibrium" (p. 166). Mayo's perspective extends beyond merely maximizing short-term output, paving the way for a more nuanced understanding of workplace motivation and productivity. He further argues that both the quality and quantity of production can be enhanced by improving the social and physical conditions of work (p. 171), indicating that workers' desires and feelings also warrant attention from management. In a subsequent work, Mayo (1945) emphasizes the importance of social safety for worker productivity, asserting that "if this [group membership] is lost, no monetary gain, no job guarantee, can be sufficient compensation" (p. 67).[16] Through this, Mayo's work not only underscores the significance of emotion within organizations but also is one of the first to identify the damaging effects of workplace loneliness. Despite advocating a softer approach, Mayo maintains that emotions, especially the "negative" ones, should be managed. His divergence from predecessors lies in acknowledging workers as more than mere cogs in a machine:

[15] Weber concludes that "[b]ureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is 'dehumanized,' the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation" (Weber, 1922/2013: 975). This resonates with classists management literature (e.g., Taylor and Fayol), but it is questionable how influential Weber was as his work was not translated into English (or French) until the mid-20th century (Bolton, 2004). Therefore, it may be speculated that classicist organization theorists influenced how Weber came to be read and interpreted outside Germany. More recent readings of Weber suggest that he was in fact a harsh critic of bureaucracy (see Weber, 1905/2014, 1994).

[16] Similarly, Herzberg (1959) developed the Two-factor Theory of work motivation, which suggests that organizations need to first fulfill certain hygiene conditions before workers can be motivated through external rewards. This involves a concern for "soft values" at work, such as policies and communication (Herzberg, 1959: 6).

they possess desires, feelings, and emotions that influence their work efficiency (see Mayo, 1933/2010).

Although early management thinkers championed values such as rationality and predictability, scholars in the late 20th century, following Mayo's lead, increasingly questioned these principles.[17] During this period, there was also a renewed interest in Spinoza's ethics, leading to what is known as the "affective turn" in the social sciences (see Massumi, 1995; Ticento Clough, 2007). As a result, an increasing number of management scholars began investigating emotions and feelings within the workplace context (see Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Fineman & Gabriel, 1996). This trend – sometimes referred to as "emotion in organization" or "workplace emotion literature" – is both theoretically and methodologically diverse. It encompasses positivist research on emotional performativity, interpretivist accounts of lived experiences, and critical debates on emotion exploitation in modern labor. In this research tradition, workplace emotions are not necessarily seen as a problem; on the contrary: feelings and emotions are considered fundamental to how workers construct and make sense of their professional lives and identities (see Fineman, 2000). By adopting this human-centric approach, scholars in the field can produce timely and ethical insights into the intangible and subjective aspects of work and organizational life. It is within this context that I position my research and make my contributions to the field.

Workplace emotion literature offers a humane foundation for a qualitative study on workplace loneliness and raises concerns that are relevant to my thesis. As workplace emotion scholars have yet to give loneliness the same attention as other more "traditional" emotions, a study focusing on workplace loneliness could offer fresh perspectives and stimulate discussions within this research tradition. Therefore, I begin this chapter by reviewing the general research on emotion in organizations and spotlight some unique studies conducted in this area. Next, I delve into existing research on workplace loneliness. Noting that previous studies on workplace loneliness predominantly adopt quantitative and positivist approaches, I explore how a qualitative study on workplace loneliness can provide a valuable complement. In the third section, I discuss recent findings on workplace belonging, demonstrating how this research has yielded qualitative insights relevant to my study. I also propose how research on workplace belonging could be furthered by incorporating concerns raised in the literature on workplace loneliness. Lastly, I examine critical and philosophical management research on existential conditions akin to loneliness, such as alienation, melancholy, and boredom.

[17] Prominent thinkers aligned with this movement instead argue that organizations must be understood as ambiguous (March & Olsen, 1976), uncertain (Weick, 1979), and socially constructed (Silverman, 1970) rather than structurally assembled. This body of literature has also emphasized the need to understand how people construct their organizational realities both cognitively and emotionally (see Blumer, 1969; Strauss, 1970).

Although these phenomena are not traditionally classified as emotions, this research is tangentially related to the emotion in organization literature because it explores how workers' desires and feelings might be utilized and exploited in the workplace. Given that loneliness also straddles the line between an existential and emotional phenomenon, I examine how these scholars enrich my study. I also plan to reciprocate by bringing concerns about esoteric phenomena (e.g., alienation and melancholy) into the context of a more everyday experience, such as loneliness.

Moreover, as I navigate these four research areas, I will pay close attention to current and relevant academic debates that my research could contribute to. At the end of this chapter, I will summarize and discuss potential avenues for contribution. By doing so, I hope to position my research within the broader discourse on emotion in organizations and outline how it can add new dimensions to our understanding of workplace loneliness.

Emotion in Organization

Emotions, often seen as the invisible undercurrent of human interactions, play a pivotal role in the dynamics of organizational behavior, shaping not only our experiences but also the identities we construct in the workplace (see Fineman, 2000). The research tradition known as "emotion in organization" delves into these complexities. This tradition is underpinned by the work of a select group of influential scholars, a key contributor being sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild. In her seminal work *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild (1979/2012) embarks on a journey to understand how professionals such as flight attendants and bill collectors are often compelled to manage their emotions as a part of their work.[18] Her rigorous empirical and theoretical explorations led to the identification of two primary strategies people employ to control their emotions: 1) surface acting (i.e., individuals conceal or feign emotional expressions) and 2) deep acting (i.e., individuals suppress or fabricate their emotional experiences) (p. 33). Hochschild

[18] In Hochschild's (1979/2012) empirical material, flight attendants described that they forced a cheerful attitude even when feeling depressed, presented calmness when afraid, and remained friendly when dealing with rude passengers (p. 199). In other words, the flight attendants often maintained an emotional façade that conflicted with their internal state. Hochschild's study demonstrates that the smile is the flight attendant's most important asset and skill (p. 4). Hochschild's empirical material also includes stories from bill collectors, who, in contrast to the flight attendant, force austere emotional facades to inspire fear and submission (p. 11). Hochschild describes these two occupations as extremes of contemporary labor market (p. 16), which implies that most other occupations also demand some emotion management (see p. 147, 156). Hochschild's theory derives from Marx's theory of alienation and is a critique of capitalist labor society, but she argues that "any functioning society makes effective us of its members' emotional labor" (p. 12) and that "the enthusiastic 'hero of labor' bears the emotional standard for the socialist state as much as the Flight Attendant of the Year does for the capitalist airline industry" (p. 11–12). Ultimately, Hochschild's work is not so much a critique of emotional labor but a problematization of the social engineering of emotions, which can dissolve people's authentic internal emotional states (p. 8, 33).

problematizes the practice of deep acting by arguing that emotional experiences are integral to how individuals perceive their surroundings. When deep acting is employed, people risk becoming detached or alienated from their authentic selves (p. 7). Hochschild's exploration led her to coin the term "emotional labor":[19] the management of emotions as part of one's work. This concept has since gained widespread recognition and adoption in the realm of workplace emotion research.[20]

While Hochschild's pioneering research has shed light on how emotions are managed in the context of work, other influential scholars have further enriched our understanding of the emotional fabric of organizations, including management scholars Stephen Fineman and Yannis Gabriel, whose contributions are particularly noteworthy for a study on workplace loneliness. During the "affective turn" around 1996, Fineman and Gabriel authored a groundbreaking monograph – *Experiencing Organizations*. This work compiles real-life narratives to illustrate emotional complexities inherent to organizational membership. From joy to fear, frustration to anxiety and even alienation, hate, and love, Fineman and Gabriel (1996) give voice to the wide spectrum of emotions and feelings that can stir in the workplace. They highlight the seemingly unpredictable and illogical aspects of organizations, challenging the historical perspective that workplaces are primarily rational and dehumanized arenas (see also Fineman, 2006). This sentiment is echoed by other scholars who affirm that employees may experience nearly the full range of emotions in their professional lives (e.g., Lazarus & Cohen-Charash, 2001; Ashkanasy & Cooper, 2008: 12-13). Moreover, Fineman and Gabriel's influential work emphasizes the necessity to delve deeper than the simple cause-and-effect dynamics of emotions. They encourage a phenomenological approach to studying these experiences, providing a richer, more nuanced understanding of emotions in the workplace. Echoing Hochschild, they also advocate for the use of critical ethnographic methodologies to unmask the often hidden political and ethical implications of emotions at work (see Fineman, 2000).

Building on the ideas of Fineman, Gabriel, and Hochschild, the application of critical methodologies in workplace emotion research often involves a quest to uncover structures of emotional oppression and exploitation (see Sieben &

[19] In a study of nurses, Strauss et al. (1982) develop a similar concept. The authors refer to nurses' labor as sentimental work because they work on "alive, sentient, and reacting" objects (Strauss et al., 1982), but this term has not gained the same widespread application.

[20] Here, it has been argued that because emotional labor is no simple feat, people who are capable of regulating emotions are valuable to employers (Ashkanasy & Cooper, 2008: 31). Similarly, emotional labor has been shown to improve work experience (Shuler & Sypher, 2000) and grant a sense of agency over self-expression at work (Zapf et al., 1999). That said, while emotional labor can be empowering, much research has echoed Hochschild's (1979/2012) concern that emotional labor may lead to impaired physical and mental health (e.g., Morris & Feldman, 1996; Parker & Wall, 1998).

Wettergren, 2010). Commonly, this body of research acknowledges the aphorism that a happy worker is a productive worker, but it problematizes the instrumentalization of emotion to serve organizational objectives, viewing it as a potential source of alienation (e.g., Costas, 2009). This concern resonates with broader discourse in management theory that has observed a shift in how organizations exert control: from authoritative control to more indirect forms of governance (e.g., Peters & Waterman, 1982; Kunda, 1991; Kreps, 1990). Within the "emotion in organization" literature, this shift is frequently interpreted as organizations striving to engage not merely the cognitive and physical capacities of their workers but also their emotional selves – their "hearts and souls" (Bolton, 2004: 43). Consequently, critical emotion scholars extend their inquiry beyond the regulation of emotions. They delve into the ways emotions themselves can be tools for social control, shaping interpersonal dynamics, influencing the broader organizational culture (see Lindebaum, 2017). In essence, the concern is not just how emotions are managed but how emotions manage us.

Another significant figure in the field of workplace emotion research is management scholar Neal Ashkanasy, founder of Emotions Network (EMONET)[21] in 1997. Within this research community, the traditional demarcation between critical (or interpretivist) and positivist research methodologies becomes less distinct, with scholars focusing their efforts on capturing the multifaceted nature of workplace emotions as comprehensibly as possible (see Ashkanasy & Cooper, 2008: 42; Fisher & Ashkanasy, 2000). In line with this, a large amount of quantitative research on workplace emotions has been carried out. Among other things, this body of literature has found that positive emotions increase creativity (Amabile et al., 2005; Binnewies & Wörnlein, 2011), general performance ratings (Staw et al., 1994), and decisiveness and willingness toward risk-taking (Mittal & Ross, 1998) at work. This research echoes Mayo's (1930) argument that organizations need to tend to workers' emotional states to improve performance. On this note, empirical research suggests that organizations can foster positive emotions by promoting goal achievement and rewarding interactions (Basch & Fisher, 1998) as well as autonomy (Larson, 1989). Conversely, excessive demands (Teuchmann et al., 1999), high workload (Repetti, 1993), the demand for role juggling (Williams et al., 1991), and enforced overtime (Rau & Triemer, 2004) can induce negative emotions in the workplace. Toxic antisocial behavior such as bullying and disrespect further contribute to negative emotional experiences in the workplace (Totterdell & Niven, 2014). It has been posited that the intensity of these negative emotions is often proportional to the perceived injustice of the act or event

[21] EMONET is a community for workplace emotion scholars and organizes regular conferences. EMONET has produced a long list of research papers on the topic (see Härtel, Ashkanasy, & Zerbe, 2000, 2005). As of 2020, EMONET has over 1400 members around the globe (EMONET, 2020).

that triggered them in the workplace (Lawrence, 2008).[22] These findings have significant implications for understanding workplace loneliness as it is generally categorized as a "negative" emotion (see Wright, 2005) and raises compelling questions about whether and how organizations might have the incentive to manage loneliness similar to how other emotions may be controlled.

As previously noted, workplace emotions are often categorized as either positive (e.g., happiness and excitement) or negative (e.g., anger and shame), where the former is to be fostered and the latter is to be avoided. Challenging this dualist view, Lindebaum and Jordan (2012) argue that the outcome of workplace emotions, positive or negative, is context-dependent (p. 1029). Similarly, Bodenhausen et al. (1994) posit that emotions influence information processing in diverse ways. Anger, for example, can prompt heuristic[23] processing of information and problem-solving, which might affect productivity either positively or negatively depending on the complexity of the task at hand (Bodenhausen et al., 1994). Expanding on this, Lindebaum and Jordan (2012) insist that when evaluating outcomes of emotional behavior, it must be considered positive or negative for who and in what cultural context.[24] This perspective suggests that organizational and private interests may not always align.[25] Similarly, other workplace emotion scholars propose that painful experiences, often associated with "negative" emotions, are

[22] Interestingly, people report fewer positive emotions when interacting with superiors compared to interactions with colleagues and customers (Bono et al., 2007). This could be explained by the findings that people experience fewer positive feelings when they compare themselves to others who they perceive to be more successful (Spence et al., 2011), but the asymmetrical power relation itself may also be involved. On this note, it has been found that leaders unconsciously reproduce their own moods in their followers (Sy et al., 2005), but moods and emotions also spread among colleagues (Ilies et al., 2007). This may be explained by empathy; however, an emotion expressing itself in one person may directly provoke or please others and consequently produce positive or negative emotions. Moods can spill over from life outside work (Williams & Alliger, 1994). This is accentuated by research that suggests people tend to misattribute emotions (see Schwarz & Clore, 1983).

[23] In this context, heuristics refers to someone working out problems on their own. When people are angry, they are less likely to collaborate with others. Since some tasks are more efficiently solved when the individual works alone, anger can sometimes have a positive effect on productivity.

[24] Exemplifying the latter, Lindebaum and Jordan (2012) highlight that western organization and management research tends to view shame as detrimental to productivity (see Fineman, 2006); however, in Japanese culture, shame is seen as a constructive emotion that motivates workers to put in the extra effort (either to avoid shame or to recover from earlier experiences of shame). This emphasizes that emotional behavior is not only momentary (as in an emotional episode) as people also behave proactively as well as reactively to emotions. A parallel can be made with the sensation of cold: chilly temperatures can be painful, so people proactively avoid coldness by dressing appropriately, and if they become chilled, they will momentarily shiver, leading to reactively seeking warmth.

[25] In another piece, Lindebaum and Jordan (2014) elaborate that both positive and negative emotions have meaningful functions in organizations and that it can sometimes be good to feel bad. In line with this, Tyran (2018) argues that sadness can have positive outcomes at work. Similarly, Gabriel and Lindebaum (2016) conceptualize anger as a moral emotion in organizations. In this piece, the authors argue that anger is constructive when it resolves conflicts and produces corrective behavior in others (ibid).

crucial to individual identity processes and may highlight underlying structural or interpersonal issues that need resolution rather than superficial fixes (Learmonth & Humphreys, 2011; see also Hochschild, 1979/2012). This view challenges the assumptions of positivist workplace emotion research and calls into question what emotions mean to the individuals who experience and express them as well as their peers. In this light, loneliness, although painful, may not necessarily be "bad." That is, loneliness could serve a meaningful role both for the individual and the group within the workplace. The potential role of loneliness has been largely ignored in prior workplace loneliness research (see the next section) and deserves further exploration.

Another critical discourse within this body of literature revolves around the conceptualization of "emotion." As introduced in Chapter 1, at least two distinct emotion models exist, leading to a division within workplace emotion research. Although many management and organization scholars perceive emotions as constructed and subjective phenomena[26] (e.g., Hochschild, 1990; Thoits, 1990; Sieben & Wettergren, 2010), a few seemingly align more with the essentialist/naturalist discrete emotions model (e.g., Lindebaum & Jordan, 2012; Lazarus & Cohen-Charash, 2001). This theoretical schism creates a certain ambiguity about whether to prioritize the experienced or expressed dimension of emotion. Hochschild (1979/2012) addresses this by identifying different forms of emotion management – i.e., surface acting and deep acting; however, not all scholars in workplace emotion extend their considerations this far. This is a problem because whether one is concerned with the utilization of a smile or the feeling of joy has significant philosophical and empirical implications. The former arguably leans more toward the management of the body, such as gestures and facial expressions, rather than of the heart (encompassing passions and desires). By studying loneliness as an "abstract" and "constructed" emotion, I aim to contribute meaningfully to this ongoing discussion.

While studies on workplace emotion often approach emotions in a broad sense, some notable investigations have delved into single emotions within the workplace. This includes, but is not limited to, Anderson and Bateman's (1997) study of

[26] According to Hochschild (1990), emotions are made up of physiological, cognitive, and behavioral activities as well as the cultural implications of these (p. 119).

cynicism,[27] Orr's (2003) study of shame,[28] Vidaillet's (2008) exploration of envy,[29] Hazen's (2008) analysis of grief,[30] and Kish-Gephart et al.'s (2009) study of fear.[31] These researchers contribute significantly to our understanding of the emotional dynamics within organizations. However, loneliness is one emotional phenomenon that is conspicuously scarce in the workplace emotion literature. Few qualitative research projects underscore the experience of loneliness in organizations, and it is only sporadically mentioned. Moreover, these mentions are brief.[32] The reasons for this lack of focus on loneliness are unclear. For example, perhaps loneliness goes unnoticed because it is not as outwardly expressive as other emotions (see Prinz, 2003). Regardless, given that loneliness is a common experience in the workplace (see Cigna, 2020; Gallup, 2020; Zhaopin, 2018), it is increasingly urgent to give workplace loneliness the same qualitative attention that other emotions have received.

In this quest, the "emotion in organization" research tradition, as outlined in this chapter, provides a robust foundation. For example, Fineman's (2000) call for phenomenologically and critically oriented research on the experience and exploitation of workplace emotion offers a relevant methodological direction for this thesis. Furthermore, by grounding my dissertation in concerns emphasized in qualitative emotion in organization literature (e.g., emotional labor and exploitation of emotions), I wish to join these scholars in producing ethical and timely insights on the intangible and subjective aspects of work and organizational life. A qualitative study on workplace loneliness can offer a fresh perspective on both emotional management and how emotional phenomena govern organizations. As previously stated, the need for such a study is urgent, not only because workplace loneliness seems to be on the rise, but also because workplace loneliness research is becoming over-saturated by quantitative inquiries (Wright & Silard, 2021). In the next section, I will dig deeper into what has been said about workplace loneliness.

[27] In this study, the authors found that "executive compensation, poor organizational performance, and harsh, immediate layoffs" cause cynicism in the workplace (Andersson & Bateman, 1997: 449).
[28] Orr (2003) develops an economic model of shame, suggesting that (fear of) shame can motivate productive behavior and that peer surveillance can lead to decreased cooperation by increasing shame. For Orr, shame has a bilateral role in organizations.
[29] In her dissertation, Vidaillet (2008) aims to holistically grasp how envy plays out in the workplace by exploring its complex nature, mechanisms, causes, and effects. Emphasizing the detrimental effects of envy in organizations, Vidaillet proposes ways to ensure envy does not get out of hand. See also Duffy et al.'s (2021) study of envy in the workplace, which emphasizes the experience of being envied.
[30] Hazen (2008) takes an original approach toward grief in organization by exploring how organizations (colleagues and managers) respond to a grieving individual and discuss how members of the organization can aid or obstruct the healing processes associated with grief.
[31] Kish-Gephart et al. (2009) demonstrate how fear in the workplace can silence people and render them passive.
[32] However, a few studies indirectly deal with loneliness by recognizing the social and organizational aspect of shame (e.g., Creed et al., 2014; De Hooge et al., 2010).

Workplace Loneliness

Despite loneliness being a common experience in the workplace (Cigna, 2020; Gallup, 2020, Zhaopin, 2018), it has long been neglected in management and organizational scholarship (see Wright, 2005; Lam & Lau, 2012). Consequently, workplace loneliness represents a ripe area of exploration that has attracted increasing attention from researchers and journalists over the past decade (see Firoz, et al., 2020). While mass media often interchangeably use the terms loneliness and isolation, scholars define workplace loneliness as "the [emotional] distress caused by the perceived lack of good quality interpersonal relationships between employees in a work setting" (Wright, 2005: 97). This suggests that loneliness is not an objective condition or merely a feeling; rather, it is an emotional phenomenon with potential experiential, cognitive, and behavioral manifestations (Perlman & Peplau, 1982; see also Chapter 1 of this thesis). This perspective has prompted scholars to investigate the multifaceted ways loneliness manifests within organizations. Subsequently, an extensive body of quantitative research has delved into the effects of workplace loneliness, uncovering a host of detrimental impacts. These impacts can broadly be categorized into three areas: work productivity, interpersonal relationships, and mental health.

Regarding work productivity, loneliness has been found to have a negative correlation with task performance (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2011) and creativity (Peng et al., 2017). It also appears to increase indecisiveness (Fry & Bloyce, 2017) and feelings of meaninglessness at work (Anand & Mishra, 2021) and decrease organizational commitment (Yilmaz, 2008; Tabancalı & Korumaz, 2015; Ayazlar & Güzel, 2014). This suggests that loneliness can impair an employee's ability to perform effectively and find satisfaction in work. Loneliness also impacts interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Studies have linked it to reduced trust (Aksoy, 2019; Rotenberg, 1994) and increased workplace incivility (Hershcovis et al., 2017) and deviance (Yavuz, et al., 2019; Lam & Lau, 2012). Notably, Ozcelik and Barsade (2018) found that lonely workers often worsen their situation by isolating themselves in the workplace, creating a negative feedback loop as they are perceived as less approachable by colleagues. In terms of mental health, loneliness has been associated with greater pessimism (Davis et al., 1992), anxiety, anger, fear, and general emotional instability (Cacioppo et al., 2006) as well as increased shyness (Cheek & Busch, 1981). Importantly, these impacts of loneliness are not confined to the individual level. Guo (2020) found that workplace loneliness can reduce the quality and quantity of social interactions at an organizational level, suggesting that it has the potential to alter the social environment at work. These findings collectively highlight the far-reaching adverse effects of workplace loneliness, both for individuals and organizations. They also underscore why addressing loneliness should be a priority for managers and further emphasize the

importance of this thesis, shedding light on the complexities and manifestations of loneliness in the workplace.

Unpacking the causes of workplace loneliness, several factors have been identified at interpersonal and organizational levels. At the interpersonal level, antisocial behaviors such as bullying and ostracization, are significant contributors to feelings of loneliness (O'Reilly et al., 2015; Dussault & Frenette, 2014). Lack of recognition at work is another factor that apparently fuels loneliness (Stoica et al., 2014). Additionally, poor communication between managers and employees can increase loneliness, with a low frequency of interaction being correlated with high levels of loneliness (Arslan et al., 2020). On the other hand, frequent interaction with superiors has been associated with emotional exhaustion and loneliness, suggesting a complex relationship between manager-employee interaction frequency and feelings of loneliness (Anand & Mishra, 2021).[33] At the organizational level, competition and individualistic social environments have been theorized as key predictors of loneliness (Perlman & Peplau, 1982: 9). Work alienation[34] has also been identified as a factor that exacerbates loneliness (Amarat et al., 2018). Furthermore, several studies suggest a link between technology use and loneliness (Odacı & Kalkan, 2010; Enez Darcin et al., 2016; Bian & Leung, 2015; Turkle, 2011, 2016), although the direction of this correlation remains unclear. In terms of employment conditions, Standing (2011: 25) argues that temporary employment could lead to loneliness. Finally, hierarchy seems to have a negative effect on loneliness. For example, Hill (1992/2003: 182) portrays the organizational life of a manager as utterly lonely,[35] and many studies suggest that top-level positions can

[33] This is aligned with research that suggests that people experience negative emotions in interaction with superiors (see Bono et al., 2007; Spence et al., 2011).

[34] The authors referred to work alienation as "a condition of psychological separation from one's image and social relations inside and outside the workplace [. . .] alienation is associated with the feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, self-estrangement and normlessness" (Amarat et al., 2018: 554).

[35] Hill (1992/2003), observing workers moving up the hierarchical ladder, found that few workers understand the burdens of authority before accepting a promotion as they seem to romanticize the manager position. Once promoted, Hill's managers quickly realized that they were expected to act as role models for their subordinates (p. 35); that is, they had to manipulate their own appearance and emotions (p. 170). Hill suggests that "they [the managers] must appear enthusiastic and optimistic [. . .] the managers had to be careful expressing anger, anxiety, and frustration, portraying maturity and professionalism and a sense of serenity" (p. 187). A particularly difficult change for new managers was the detachment from their co-workers. Several managers expressed a sense of isolation: "I'm no longer one of the boys. No one asks me out for lunch. No one gossips with me. I'm alone" (p. 182) and "I know that I'm now part of the management team. But I don't feel like a manager [. . .] I feel like I'm in no man's land" (p. 183). Hill further illustrates how the managers' peers danced around them, concealed their feelings, and filtered their thoughts, which produced a sense of personal rejection in the new managers (p. 184). Paradoxically, she argues that even though they hated the isolation, "the new managers exacerbated the problem by their behavior. Many experienced 'strong impulses to build a fence around [themselves]' to give them some 'space' between themselves and the job's negativity" (ibid). Hill portrays the managers as agents who make

be isolating (Jackson, 1977; Jazzar & Kimball, 2004; Joiner, 2011; Gabriel et al., 2020). A Harvard Business Review survey found that half of CEOs admit feeling lonely in their roles (2012). Similarly, small business owners report high levels of loneliness (Gumpert & Boyd, 1983). However, research remains inconclusive on whether managers are lonelier than non-managers (Wright, 2005, 2012; Wright & Silard, 2021).

As demonstrated, there is no consensus on the primary cause of workplace loneliness. Rather, it appears that any negative social experience can potentially act as a trigger.[36] As such, various interventions – e.g., hiring culture fit employees, cross-cultural training, and extracurricular social activities – have been suggested as measures to mitigate and prevent loneliness in the workplace (see Sekhon & Srivastava, 2021). However, these interventions have often proven to be less effective than desired (Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999), which may be attributed to their failure to address the root causes of loneliness (Wright, 2015). Wright (2015) has further argued that due to the diverse triggers of workplace loneliness, interventions should be individually tailored to avoid causing more harm than good. For example, Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), as a method to help people modify maladaptive perceptions and social expectations, has been proposed as a practical approach to combat loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2015; Wright, 2015). Similarly, job autonomy has been found to reduce loneliness, possibly by mediating role identity and social status in the organization, countering feelings of social alienation and ostracization (Wang & Liu, 2020). Based on these insights, to prevent unnecessary instances of loneliness, it seems crucial to foster realistic expectations of social interaction and friendship at work.

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the best of their situation, but they also sometimes find themselves in situations where they were not prepared. Whereas Hochschild's flight attendants had the possibility to vent their frustration with others if they appeared professional in front of the passengers, Hill's managers did not have this opportunity. Since the new managers were eager to prove themselves capable of fulfilling their new roles, they were reluctant to rely on others for support (p. 184). Hill's study is a nuanced account of organizational life, as it considers not only ethics and culture at work but also how managers (who were once regular workers) bring their own history and needs into the role. Ultimately, Hill's study is one of a few qualitative studies that consider loneliness in the workplace although it does not emphasize it.

[36] With the ambition to develop a more comprehensive model of what causes workplace loneliness, Anand and Mishra (2021) derive four categorical sources: individual aspects (e.g., personality and biography), peer-related aspects (e.g., interpersonal conflict and bullying), leader-related aspects (e.g., poor leader communication and exercising of authority), and organizational aspects (e.g., competitive and individualistic social climate). The authors also offer an answer to why leader-employee interaction can both reduce and increase feelings of loneliness. When the employee has a strong relationship with her superior, interaction will likely decrease loneliness; however, when the relationship is weak, interaction may increase loneliness (Anand & Mishra, 2021). This is aligned with how attachment theories explain loneliness (see Weiss, 1973; Bowlby, 1969). Therefore, improving leader communication and leader-employee relationships has been argued to be an effective method to combat loneliness in the workplace (Arslan et al., 2020).

The previous discussion provides an overview of the state of quantitative research on workplace loneliness. These studies, while offering valuable insights, typically rely on psychological models of loneliness without invoking explicit theories (Firoz et al., 2020). A prominent model influencing loneliness research across various disciplines is the Situational Theory of Loneliness, introduced by social psychologist Robert Weiss in the 1970s. Weiss (1973) problematizes the underestimation of personal experiences of loneliness by his contemporaries. He argues that they view loneliness as an anomaly rather than as part of ordinary human life (p. 10). According to Weiss, this results in a disproportionate focus on loneliness in the mentally ill and therefore overlooks the "ordinary" and "everyday" loneliness most people experience (p. 12). Weiss contends that researchers often unfairly stereotype the lonely as justifiably rejected, shy, unattractive, and self-absorbed, a view that exacerbates the stigma attached to loneliness, making it more challenging to study (ibid). To counter this, Weiss advocates for a shift in focus from the individual's characteristics to the situational factors causing their loneliness (p. 75) hence the "situational" in his theory. As workplace loneliness researchers typically explore how work conditions may cause loneliness, Weiss's perspective is particularly relevant for studying loneliness in organizational settings. Consequently, this approach serves as a fitting point of departure for my qualitative study.

Today, despite its age, Weiss's work remains one of the few established theories on loneliness, with its influence evident in quantitative loneliness tools such as the UCLA Loneliness Scale (ULS). The ULS model frames loneliness as a subjective social situation in line with Weiss's views (see Russell et al., 1978).[37] Using ULS, scholars measure loneliness through standardized questions such as "How often do you feel left out?", "How often do you feel that there is no one you can turn to?", and "How often do you feel like you lack companionship?" (Russell, 1996). Although the ULS has high internal consistency (Russell et al., 1978), it has been criticized for focusing solely on the social (situational) aspects of loneliness, neglecting the individual and existential aspects (Solano, 1986: 231-232). This limitation, stemming directly from the ULS's alignment with Weiss's theory, poses a notable weakness in much quantitative loneliness research. Although the ULS is popular among workplace loneliness research (e.g., Yilmaz, 2008; Ozcelik & Barsade, 2011, 2018), its applicability in the organizational context has been challenged (Wright, 2005). This is potentially another remnant of Weiss's theory, as Weiss (1973) only considers the lack of friendship and the lack of love as sources of loneliness. Weiss refers to these as social loneliness and emotional loneliness,

[37] The UCLA Loneliness Scale was originally based on Sisenwein's (1964) loneliness scale (Russell et al., 1978). Although Sisenwein includes statements such as "Death will be my only companion," the UCLA Loneliness Scale was designed to be less extreme and contains phrases such as "I have nobody to talk to" and "There is no one I can turn to" (ibid).

respectively, and maintains that these are two distinct deficits that cannot be alleviated by increased provisions of the other (pp. 19, 227).[38] This typology is a helpful point of departure for any research on loneliness, but it is somewhat problematic for a study on loneliness in organizations as it is not clear how workplace loneliness fits into this binary model. Interestingly, neuroscientists have acknowledged a kind of "collective loneliness" (see Cacioppo et al., 2015) related to people's need to belong to a group (see Allen, 2020). However, such accounts are typically made in passing, and the term has not been emphasized in previous workplace loneliness research.

In response to the limitations of the ULS in the organizational context, industrial psychologist Sarah Wright developed the Loneliness at Work Scale (LWS). The LWS focuses on workplace experiences and includes statements such as "I often feel alienated from my co-workers" and "I often feel emotionally distant from the people I work with" (Wright, 2005: 86). Unlike the ULS, the LWS also touches on the more existential aspects of loneliness with statements such as "I experience a general sense of emptiness when I am at work" (ibid). Over the past decade, this model has gained traction among workplace loneliness researchers (e.g., Tabancalı & Korumaz, 2015; Peng et al., 2017; Aksoy, 2019), but it still does not address the dichotomy between social and emotional loneliness. Rather, it seems to approach workplace loneliness as something different altogether. This gap presents an opportunity for theoretical contribution. Therefore, in this thesis, I extend Weiss's (1973) typology with an integrative perspective that addresses the nuances and complexities of loneliness in organizations.

Currently, Wright is one of the leading workplace loneliness researchers, having published numerous quantitative papers on the topic. In a recent article, Wright and Silard (2021) explore the various antecedents that may be involved in an individual's construction of workplace loneliness, such as poor social skills and an unfriendly social climate. However, the authors only approach the problem conceptually, admitting the difficulties studying workplace loneliness qualitatively. Addressing this and echoing Weiss (1973), Wright and Silard (2021) emphasize that loneliness is tricky to study because it remains stigmatized and is often kept hidden in the workplace (p. 1061). Furthermore, the authors call attention to quantitative loneliness research becoming over-saturated and held back by the lack of qualitative inquiries (p. 1075). This observation highlights a pressing need for more research on what workplace loneliness is like and what it means to those who

[38] For example, in Weiss's view, a widowed wife cannot escape her emotional loneliness caused by losing her beloved husband by spending more time with her friends. Likewise, a mother nursing an infant at home will be unsuccessful combating her social loneliness by investing more emotional energy in the child.

experience it. Such research would also align with the concerns raised within qualitative emotion in organization literature (as noted in the previous section).

One of the few qualitative studies on workplace loneliness is Dor-Haim's (2021) inquiry into professional isolation and loneliness in school principals. Dor-Haim (2021) interviewed 19 Israeli assistant principals about their experiences of occupational loneliness. In his study, the principals associated loneliness with feelings of abandonment, separation from the teaching unit, and missing a sense of belonging. A common theme in the interviews was acknowledging that the principal role is inherently lonely due to its isolated function in the organization. Although this suggests that the interviewed principals were capable of distancing themselves from the situation, it did not seem to make the experience any less painful. Using qualitative material, Dor-Haim shows that descriptions of loneliness are diverse and that experiences overlap with other emotional phenomena such as sadness and emptiness. Dor-Haim's study is unique[39] and calls attention to the need for greater methodological pluralism within workplace loneliness research (see Firoz et al., 2020). Further qualitative inquiries on the construction of workplace loneliness, which includes associated feelings, thoughts, and behavior, and their cultural/structural implications may diversify previous research and offer new insights. Since the principal occupation is a relatively unique profession (see Dor-Haim, 2022), qualitative research on how people in other positions and careers experience and cope with loneliness is an opportunity for my study.

In the literature cited above, loneliness is predominantly framed as an ailment: something to be prevented and resolved (see Firoz et al., 2020). Challenging this view, recent research has found that loneliness may also have positive outcomes in organizations. For example, Gafoor (2020) identifies a positive correlation between loneliness and work creativity, which contrasts with Peng et al.'s (2017) earlier findings. Moreover, loneliness can manifest productively in leaders by promoting self-correcting behaviors, adaptive problem-solving, and work engagement (Gabriel et al., 2020). Likewise, Yavuz et al. (2019) argue that loneliness promotes desirable organizational outcomes through various mechanisms, such as constructive deviance. This touches on the potential positive effects of "negative" experiences in organizations and challenges the dualist view of symmetrical positive and negative feelings and emotions. However, few studies have researched the positive effects of loneliness in organizations, and some conceptual effort may

[39] Following the publication of the 2021 paper, Dor-Haim published a set of articles that expand how principals experience and cope with loneliness. For example, Dor-Haim and Oplatka (2021) found that school principals perceive that loneliness reduces their work performance, physical health, emotional well-being, and positive outlook. In another article, Dor-Haim (2022) notes three coping patterns for loneliness in principals: seeking support, changing the situation, and adjusting perspectives.

be necessary to consolidate these findings with the more general perspective of loneliness as an undesirable phenomenon. This presents another opportunity for a contribution that I intend to consider in my study.

Although the phenomenon has long been neglected by researchers, the recent scholarly attention from all corners of the world suggests that workplace loneliness is not limited to a small set of geographic locations or cultures: it is a universal phenomenon (Firoz et al., 2020). This underscores the importance of understanding workplace loneliness comprehensively. However, as illustrated, most research on workplace loneliness is quantitative in nature, with its most significant contributions originating from industrial psychology. While this literature often acknowledges loneliness as a subjective feeling or emotion, it generally operationalizes the phenomenon into quantifiable social/emotional deprivation or isolation (Sønderby, 2013). This approach may lead researchers to overlook the lived experiences of loneliness in the workplace. Therefore, in this thesis, I aim to advance the academic inquiry into workplace loneliness by adopting a different methodological approach. Notably, on the other side of the fence, management scholars investigating workplace belonging seem to have been more successful in studying their phenomenon qualitatively. Given the likely relationship between loneliness and belonging, this research may provide valuable insights for my study.

Belonging in the Workplace

Belongingness is often depicted as a basic human need (Allen, 2020) and is recognized as being so powerful that it influences all aspects of behavior (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Notably, a sense of belonging improves not only individual psychological health but also collective well-being (Roffey, 2013). This explains why belonging has garnered significant scholarly attention across many domains of social sciences, including management and organization literature. Within these fields, researchers interested in organizational behavior and employee experiences have studied the various aspects of belonging in the workplace (e.g., Fenton et al., 2012; Hershcovis et al., 2017; Filstad et al., 2019; Mobasseri et al., 2021). Yet, despite a clear link suggested between workplace loneliness and the absence of belonging (e.g., Dor-Haim, 2021), the relationship between these two phenomena remains insufficiently explored.[40] This gap is surprising considering that workplace belongingness could be seen as the antithesis of workplace loneliness. Therefore, exploring this relationship and potentially integrating the knowledge on these two phenomena may be fruitful to both workplace loneliness

[40] I could only find one recent workplace belonging paper that mentions loneliness as a related concept: Rubin et al. (2019).

and workplace belonging research. In this section, I take the initial step toward this goal by reviewing relevant research on workplace belonging.

As with workplace loneliness research, research on workplace belonging has really taken off in the last decade. This body of work reveals that belonging increases people's resilience to stress (Shakespeare-Finch & Daley, 2017), reduces turnover intentions (Morajkar, 2020), improves work performance, and reduces sick leave (Kellerman & Reece, 2019). When it comes to fostering feelings of belonging in the workplace, perceived sameness seems to be fundamental (Filstad et al., 2019). Therefore, it has been argued that cultural diversity (Martin, 2014) and hierarchy (Filstad et al., 2019) could inhibit feelings of workplace belonging by mediating a psychological distance between colleagues and increasing social conflict. Sexism and other forms of discrimination are also negatively correlated with reported belonging in the workplace (Rubin et al., 2019; Haldorai et al., 2020), and no amount of economic compensation or elevated status can fully compensate for this (Mobasseri et al., 2021). Building on this, Allen (2020) has argued that belonging is about perceiving social connections as meaningful and satisfactory. Others have characterized belonging as a pleasurable feeling that arises when an individual feels accepted and recognized by the group (Hagerty et al., 1992). From this vantage point, it may be said that workplace belonging is not only about "being together" but also about sharing a common goal and working together toward the goal (see Filstad et al., 2019). Given the literature above, workplace belonging mirrors workplace loneliness, both conceptually and empirically.

Furthermore, research on workplace belonging has determined that belonging reduces workplace incivility by mediating a greater sense of potential embarrassment (Hershcovis et al., 2017; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This points to a potential normative dimension of belongingness, as individuals tend to govern and modify their behavior to avoid rejection (Mohamed et al., 2014; Newheiser et al., 2017). Consistent with this, research has repeatedly demonstrated a link between belonging and identity processes (Filstad et al., 2019; Brewer, 2007). Elaborating on this, May (2011) argues that belonging is the "process of creating a sense of identification with one's social, relational and material surroundings" (p. 368). Similarly, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) argue that individuals establish their work identities through a struggle for belonging. This struggle again points to the normativity of belongingness as individuals strive to be "good" (by ethical standards) for recognition and a sense of belonging. That is, the desire to belong motivates action. Considering the potential managerial benefits of this drive, organizations have a compelling incentive to foster workplace belonging and psychological safety among their employees (Cluff, 2022).

Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory are complementary models that explain why and how individuals perceive themselves as belonging to a group

(Haslam, 1997). According to this perspective, categorizing social relationships and networks is essential for people to make sense of their social environment (see Oakes et al., 1994).[41] Social Identity Theory also suggests that individuals not only base their identities on idiosyncratic properties such as physiological attributes and psychological traits but also derive identity from their relationships with others (Tajfel, 1974: 69; Ashforth & Mael, 1989: 21). This theory underscores that belonging promotes self-esteem (Tajfel, 1979), and people who hide aspects of themselves at work may struggle maintaining a positive self-image (Newheiser et al., 2017). Moreover, social identity and belonging might serve as a social adhesive that promotes prosocial behavior toward the group (Vugt & Hart, 2004; Amiot & Aubin, 2012: 563). However, this also means that belonging may be linked with behaviors such as in-group favoritism and intergroup conflict. In line with this, workgroups are occasionally conceptualized as "modern tribes" (see Haldorai et al., 2020), underlining their importance to an individual's social and psychological well-being.[42] This association, however, also accentuates the potential tribalistic baggage that comes with belongingness.

Social distance is another sociological concept that is used to measure the cultural and affective distance between two social groups (see Bogardus, 1947).[43] Much research suggests that people prefer to be around others who they perceive as similar to themselves (Montoya et al., 2008). This applies to cultural and physical characteristics as well as other idiosyncratic attributes such as hobbies, political affiliations, and religious beliefs (ibid). From this perspective, belonging in the workplace can be a double-edged sword, as it requires the existence of an "outgroup" (Nelson, 2003; see also Tajfel, 1979). In other words, some people's sense of workplace belonging may come at the price of the exclusion of others (see O'Neil Foster, 2021). After all, without boundaries, group membership holds little

[41] Here, in-group and out-group are relevant concepts describing an individual's perceived social position. In-group is the group an individual categorizes as "us/we," and out-group is the group an individual categorizes as "them/they" (Tajfel, 1979). Such categorization processes are arguably relative as they depend on context.

[42] Here, tribe refers to a group of people bound together by similarities and shared goals (Scott & Marshall, 2015). Modern tribes have also been described as a group of people who an individual is willing to make sacrifices for and expect the same in return (Junger, 2016). Although societies are too large and open and nuclear families are too small and closed to be considered tribes, work organizations and work groups are comparable to prehistoric (and medieval) tribes. For example, like organizations, prehistoric hunter-gatherers typically consisted of 10-100 people (Groeneveld, 2016), had a hierarchical structure (Hamilton et al., 2007), deployed division of labor (Marlowe, 2007), and members worked toward a common purpose (the survival and prosperity of the tribe). Given that this constituted the way humans lived from before the appearance of *Homo sapiens*, about 200,000 years ago to about 12,000 years ago (Britannica, 2021), it is reasonable that this way of living is imprinted on people's social needs and behaviors despite the changes apparent in modern society.

[43] For example, through observations and quantitative surveys, it may be concluded that the American-Chinese community is closer to the American-Korean community than to the African-American community.

value. Importantly, studies only consistently show that perceived similarity is relevant to an individual's attraction to another and that actual (or measurable) similarity has no significant impact (Montoya et al., 2008). Although this suggests that diversity does not necessarily inhibit belongingness (Martin, 2014), it might complicate the promotion of diversity as it tends to highlight differences rather than commonalities.

On the other hand, one study found that perceived organizational diversity (e.g., disability inclusion) increased feelings of belonging, possibly by mediating a greater sense of acceptance in the workplace (Morajkar, 2020). However, a strong sense of belonging with one group (e.g., minority) might hinder an individual from identifying with a larger group (O'Neil Foster, 2021). Therefore, organizations may find it advantageous to establish an "organizational identity" that supersedes identities that workers bring with them from the outside (see Casey, 1999; Brotheride & Lee, 2006). However, it is also important to acknowledge that workers do not always desire belonging to their workplace or workgroup and may actively resist the organizational identity by distancing themselves from their colleagues. Consequently, as previously noted, belongingness can be a source of conflict in the workplace, both directly and indirectly.

Although belonging is sometimes conceptualized in binary terms as being in or out, interpretivist accounts of workplace belongingness emphasize that it is not a condition but a cognitive construct (Hershcovis et al., 2017) encompassing a broad spectrum of experiences and emotions (Fenton et al., 2012). This literature posits that belonging is a dynamic experience that emerges in the moment and is always in the process of becoming or diminishing (Filstad et al., 2019). In a play on words, Filstad et al. (2019) notes that "belonging" implies a "longing" to "be" a part of something (p. 117). Arguably, this inversely describes loneliness. Specifically, the common denominator between loneliness and belonging appears to be recognition. As mentioned earlier, a sense of belonging might arise from receiving recognition (Hagerty et al., 1992), whereas loneliness seems to be related to the absence of recognition (Stoica et al., 2014). That said, the relationship between loneliness and recognition has not been thoroughly explored and warrants further empirical investigation. Both belonging and loneliness also seem to be related to a person's self-identity and self-esteem; the implications of this for workplace loneliness is another area that deserves attention.

Where belonging and loneliness diverge is in the material dimension of belonging. That is, individuals not only perceive belonging with other people in the workplace but also with the physical environment, including symbolic objects (e.g., work tools) and architecture (e.g., corporate campus) (see Filstad et al., 2019; Jaitli &

Hua, 2013).[44] This suggests an association between belongingness and familiarity, possibly serving as a means of psychological safety. In contrast, loneliness potentially centers more around emotional intimacy, perceived peer support, and self-efficacy. From this vantage point, loneliness and belongingness may not be strict antonyms after all. In this thesis, I delve deeper into the similarities between loneliness and belongingness. Lastly, although the literature on workplace belonging might not be as extensive as that on workplace loneliness, management scholars have found more success in studying workplace belonging qualitatively, particularly from a phenomenological perspective (e.g., Filstad et al., 2019; O'Neil Foster, 2021). This success could be because belonging is not a stigmatized experience but an aspect of work that people are proud of and willing to disclose. However, given that belonging is ethically "good" and desirable, self-reports of workplace belonging could also be exaggerated or romanticized. In this context, studying workplace loneliness could provide insights into the "dark side" of workplace belonging.

Alienation, Boredom, and Melancholy at Work

Loneliness is a multifaceted phenomenon with both emotional and existential properties (Moustakas, 1961/2016; Weiss, 1973; Wright, 2005; Bound-Alberti, 2019). Although only a few qualitative management and organization scholars have inquired into the experience of loneliness, numerous researchers have delved deep into other painful emotions and existential ailments in the workplace. Notably, phenomena such as alienation, boredom, and depression (including melancholy) have received interpretivist and phenomenological attention from workplace scholars (e.g., Costas, 2009; Johnsen, 2008) and have a conceptual and empirical overlap with workplace loneliness (see Firoz et al., 2020). Therefore, research on similar painful experiences in the workplace may offer valuable methodological insights for my qualitative study on workplace loneliness. Additionally, by approaching these phenomena as bordering constructs with overlapping properties, I aim to make sense of their conceptual and experiential relationship. Unlike previous sections, I focus this review on a few select researchers and their work (including methodology) rather than summarizing the findings of a large body of literature.

To begin, a prominent figure in this context is management and organization scholar Jana Costas. In her PhD dissertation, Costas explores dis-identification and self-alienation among management consultants (Costas, 2009). Costas (2009) develops a unique conceptualization of self-alienation by integrating Marx's theory of

[44] For example, research has shown that a shared corporate campus is a strong mediator for workplace belonging (Jaitli & Hua, 2013).

alienation with ideas from poststructuralists[45] (e.g., Foucault, 1926-1984; Derrida, 1930–2004), Lacan's (1977) psychoanalytic theory, and Sartre's (1972) existentialism. Costas also draws inspiration from Hochschild's (1979/2012) concept of emotional labor.[46] Based on this framework, Costas hypothesizes that the neoliberal valorization of "authenticity" impedes individuals' ability to realize their self-image because self-images have become increasingly unrealistic (Costas, 2009: 53). She further argues that workplaces exacerbate this by emphasizing values such as employee self-expression and informality, incorporating play and leisure into work, and adopting ethical and ecological corporate responsibilities (Costas, 2009). In essence, the transition from sterile, amoral, and bureaucratic organizations to "fun, sincere, and liberated" workplaces has produced a new ideal type of worker: "the authentic worker" whose virtue may eclipse people's private personas.

According to Costas (2009), the neoliberal organization has not only transformed ideals at work but also shifted private ideals, as people arguably hope to maintain more virtuous private personas than work personas. This "inflation of expectations" is what Costas believes results in self-alienation[47] in (and out of) the workplace. Framing her ideas within the concept of liminality (see Turner, 1969), Costas emphasizes the ambiguous and transient nature of work in contemporary society. Costas (2009) found substantial support for her assumptions in data she collected from 57 interviews with management consultants. Costas demonstrates that feelings of self-alienation are not as exotic as they may seem but quite common in knowledge workers. As noted, this is also the case for loneliness: whereas loneliness has historically been considered a rare condition, recent research suggests that most workers feel lonely (see previous sections). Given this and the other phenomenological similarities between loneliness and self-alienation, Costas's (2009) research is not only methodologically valuable for my study but also empirically relevant. On this note, it would be interesting to investigate the relationship between self-alienation and loneliness in the workplace.

Furthermore, through her theoretical and empirical work, Costas (2009) problematizes contemporary capitalism through the lens of self-alienation (see also

[45] Poststructuralist writers are typically associated with post-modernism. With post-modernism comes skepticism toward meta-narratives (see works by Lyotard, 1924–1988), such as Darwinism (evolutionary determinism), Marxism (essentialism and economic determinism), and Humanism. It should be acknowledged that Costas's (2009) ambition is not to improve Marxist theory but to transcend it.

[46] Whereas Hochschild is concerned that deep acting may dissolve people's "authentic" personas (cause dis-identification with the real self), Costas (2009) suggests that surface acting may instead cause self-alienation even when the real self is kept intact. According to Costas's (2009) conceptual framework, self-alienation happens when the individual is unable to live up to her own self-image.

[47] Costas (2009) also considers how spatial aspects (e.g., open plan offices and remote work) and temporal changes (e.g., accelerated progress and busyness) of contemporary work may be involved in experiences of self-alienation.

Costas & Fleming, 2009). Consequently, Costas's dissertation is more theoretically (normative) than phenomenologically driven (p. 190). In this context, the phenomenon of self-alienation serves less as the focus than as a tool for social critique. This approach is aligned with Fineman's (2000) argument that research on workplace emotion can advantageously employ critical theory to expose structures of emotional oppression and exploitation in the workplace (see also Sieben & Wettergren, 2010). Over the years, Costas's (2009) empirical work on management consultants has given rise to a series of articles. In a piece from 2012, she extends her thesis to argue that managers utilize friendliness and intimacy to influence employees: "Management may actively foster friendship relations so that an interesting interplay between formality and informality can unfold, which can have significant implications for normative control" (Costas, 2012: 393). From this standpoint, management exploits not only emotions but also intimacy and trust in the workplace. As Costas argues (2009), this might cause feelings of self-alienation, but this emotional exploitation could also be associated with experiences of social alienation and loneliness.

Another concept Costas explores is workplace boredom. In 2016, Costas and Kärreman published an article on experiences of boredom among management consultants (Costas & Kärreman, 2016). The authors capture how a discrepancy between the occupational ethos (and organizational discourse) and consultants' daily work may produce feelings of boredom. For example, the consultant occupation is presented as glamorous, creative, elitist, and fostering self-development, but the day-to-day reality often involves repetitive and menial tasks and feelings of insignificance (Costas & Kärreman, 2016). The authors argue that a consultant's work is not inherently boring but that the occupational ethos produces misaligned expectations, possibly leading to pessimism, frustration, and boredom. This highlights another point of contact between workplace loneliness and Costas's work on boredom, friendship, and self-alienation. Costas's work emphasizes that unrealistic expectations may cause a wide range of painful experiences at work. Loneliness has similarly been framed as stemming from maladaptive perceptions and expectations of social intimacy (Cacioppo et al., 2015; Wright, 2015). From this perspective, most work is not "objectively" lonely, but organizations may fail to meet people's social and emotional expectations. This could be problematic in a society oriented around labor, where social inclusion (and identity) is largely tied to organizational membership, and individuals may struggle to find a stable social context outside of work. As a result, expectations of intimacy in the workplace may increase, which could leave individuals disappointed and lonely. This is exacerbated by the trend of contemporary labor becoming increasingly precarious (see Standing, 2011). In this light, Costas's research offers a way to problematize workplace loneliness in the context of critical management and organization theory.

Another scholar who has inquired into the existential dimension of work, including boredom, is Rasmus Johnsen. In an article from 2011, Johnsen (2011) approaches boredom from an interpretivist angle, framing it as an experience without qualities.[48] Here, Johnsen problematizes research that aspires to merely understand the cause and effect of emotional and existential phenomena in the workplace, arguing that "Boredom [. . .] needs to be scrutinised on an experiential level" (p. 488). That is, Johnsen is pointing out that while scholars may attempt to measure, predict, and explain phenomena, these descriptions rarely correspond with people's lived experiences. Understanding how a phenomenon appears (both in the body and mind as well as behaviorally and structurally) is valuable knowledge, even if it is not practically useful. Elaborating on this using boredom, Johnsen (2011) makes the following observation: "Boredom [. . .] is a situation that reveals something about us, about who we are, where we come from, what we hope for and- not least - what interests us." (p. 484). From this perspective, boredom may be interpreted as an information signal with a meaningful motivational function (e.g., consider the expression "boredom is the mother of creativity/invention/evil").[49] This interpretation aligns boredom with loneliness as both can be seen as emotional phenomena that carry significant information about our identities and desires.

Addressing the motivational component of boredom in another piece,[50] Johnsen (2016) suggests that "Boredom points to the transformative possibilities [. . .] it may be taken to signify a profound, lived experience of the possibility that things could actually be different" (p. 1413). In other words, Johnsen's boredom entails a kind of emptiness that the individual will seek to fill with activity or meaning. However, the individual might not always be successful and could instead become paralyzed by intense boredom. This presents another meaningful overlap between loneliness

[48] This phrase was originally used by Goodstein (2005) in the title of her book *Experience Without qualities–Boredom and Modernity*. Johnsen's research on boredom draws heavy inspiration from Goodstein's work.

[49] Kierkegaard asserts "'Boredom is [the]root of all evil'. Strange that boredom, so still and static, should have such power to set things in motion. The effect that boredom exercises is altogether magical, except that it is not one of attraction but of repulsion" (1843/2004: 186). Kierkegaard argues that the dull ache of boredom can motivate people to make a change. This implies that a busy person will not be bored, so actions set in motion by boredom stem from idleness and not necessity. Kierkegaard believes that acting out of necessity is a moral good, so evil springs from unnecessary acts. Moreover, the proverb "boredom is the mother of invention" is an adaptation of Plato's "necessity is the mother of invention," which originates from the *Republic* as "our need will be the real creator" (Plato, ca 600 BCE; see Lotz, 2020). The alteration is somewhat unfortunate, as a person in a desperate state of need is rarely bored. That said, both ring true: boredom and necessity may motivate action alike. From another angle, boredom may be seen as the need for stimulation or purpose. The phrase "boredom is the mother of creativity" is a modern popularization of the proverb above.

[50] In this article, Johnsen (2016) takes a more critical turn, arguing that "[b]oredom is not a universal feature of human life [. . .] The rise of boredom is the rise of a conflict associated with the artificial administration of time" (pp. 1405–1406). By linking boredom and contemporary labor, Johnsen establishes boredom as a relevant phenomenon for management and organization theory.

and boredom. As noted in Chapter 1, neuroscientists believe that the pain of loneliness exists to push the individual out of a potentially dangerous situation (see Cacioppo, 2009), and phenomenologists point to a siblinghood between loneliness and boredom (see Moustakas, 1961/2016; Mijuskovic, 2012). Similarly, Johnsen (2016) refers to boredom as an abstract emotion, echoing the definition of loneliness used in this thesis as an abstract, subjective experience. Ultimately, Johnsen (2016) concludes that boredom is not inherently bad: it is a self-defense mechanism that exists to alleviate anxiety and depression (see Johnsen, 2011).[51] Therefore, despite its painful nature, boredom serves a vital function for the individual. A similar argument could be made for loneliness.

Beyond boredom, Johnsen has written extensively on melancholy and its relevance to management and organization theory. In an article from 2008, Johnsen (2008) compares the Aristotelian concept of melancholy with the contemporary understanding of stress. Johnsen argues that while there are similarities between the two experiences, the general attitude toward stress is radically different from Aristotle's appraisal of melancholy. Whereas Aristotle believes that melancholy is only possessed by exceptional individuals and essential to character formation, stress, in contemporary society, is understood as a somatic condition that can be managed to draw out the "exceptional" in the "average" worker (Johnsen, 2008: 33). Johnsen elaborates that too much stress is detrimental to productivity and therefore concepts such as "stress management" and "productive stress" have become common themes in contemporary management literature (see also Johnsen, 2009). This discussion aligns with the need for a similar conversation about loneliness in the workplace. This alignment would also contribute to the discussions about emotion in organization literature by addressing the management of another critical emotional experience in the workplace.

While Costas's work is more theoretically oriented toward social critique, Johnsen maintains the phenomena themselves as the focal points of his research. Unlike Costas, on the other hand, Johnsen does not address his research problems with (hetero-) empirical data. Rather, he employs logic and philosophy to arrive at his conclusions. One key lesson a qualitative study on workplace loneliness can learn from Johnsen's writings on melancholy is that it is not unproblematic to frame an existential or emotional phenomenon as a somatic condition that can (and should be) managed for the sake of organizational productivity. Such an approach may not only hinder our understanding of the phenomenon as a multidimensional construct but also be ethically questionable as the individual's existential (well) being may not necessarily be aligned with the organization's interests. Furthermore, through his work on boredom, melancholy, and stress, Johnsen illustrates that what

[51] See also recent research that suggests that depression is a defense mechanism against stress (e.g., Wasilewski et al., 2020).

organizations may perceive as negative phenomena to be avoided and managed are not necessarily detrimental to the individual but could even serve a self-protective function. Experiences of boredom, self-alienation, and loneliness, albeit painful, may potentially protect people from conditions, situations, and experiences that are more harmful to the individual. Here Costas's and Johnsen's work converges with Lindebaum's research on the positive aspects of "negative" emotions. Collectively, this literature offers a philosophical and methodological foundation for an interpretivist study on workplace loneliness as well as initiates a discussion on the role of loneliness in organizations.

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed four research contexts relevant to my study. First, I introduced emotion in organization as a (mostly) qualitative research tradition concerned with the role of emotion in the workplace. In my overview of this literature, I demonstrate how scholars who focus on emotion in organizations tend to challenge simplistic conceptions of emotions and criticize any attempt to correlate certain emotions with organizational performance (e.g., Fineman, 2000; Lindebaum & Jordan, 2012). These scholars seek to capture lived experiences in the workplace and discuss the emotional implications of organizational control. Through this, emotion in organization offers an ethical and nuanced approach to studying workplace emotions. Many exciting studies can be found here, but this body of literature could expand on the topic of workplace loneliness. As noted, few qualitative studies have explored loneliness in the workplace. Loneliness remains a "hidden" emotional phenomenon, which could explain why it has been overlooked in more general studies of workplace emotion and emotion management. With this thesis, I aim to contribute to workplace emotion literature by pulling loneliness into the light, not with statistical data, but by capturing lived experiences of it. This could potentially extend the field and open new avenues for qualitative emotion scholars to explore. In addition, when reviewing workplace emotion research, I note an ongoing academic debate regarding the communicative dimension of emotions – i.e., the interplay between experienced and expressed emotions. Through my qualitative study of workplace loneliness as a seemingly "abstract" (non-expressive) emotion, I hope to contribute to this discussion.

Second, I covered previous research on workplace loneliness and note that most of this literature is quantitative and positivist, often originating from industrial psychology (see Firoz, et al., 2020). This literature successfully predicts and measures workplace loneliness but overlooks (or puts aside) the experiential aspects of the phenomenon. Therefore, I have adopted a qualitative methodology that I hope provides new insights as well as refines the meaning of quantitative findings on workplace loneliness and historical loneliness models (e.g., Weiss, 1973). Moreover, I noted that previous workplace loneliness research tends to categorize

loneliness as an inherently "negative" and undesirable phenomenon in the workplace that should be prevented or cured. This position is legitimized by the correlation between loneliness and mortality, but it potentially neglects that painful experiences can fulfill meaningful functions. This neglect reflects another ongoing discussion in the workplace emotion community (i.e., the dichotomy of emotions): Is it helpful to categorize certain emotions as "positive" and others as "negative" and how is this distinction made? By pursuing a more nuanced perspective of workplace loneliness, I hope to expand and advance workplace loneliness research as well as contribute to the debate on positive and negative emotions.

Third, I summarized recent research on workplace belonging. Here, I noted that scholars have acknowledged the normative and performative dimensions of belongingness but have neglected the ethical implications of this observation. As loneliness and belongingness appear conceptually and empirically related, albeit distinct, integrating research on workplace loneliness and workplace belonging may help develop a more comprehensive perspective of both phenomena. In my review of both workplace loneliness and workplace belonging literature, I have also identified recognition as a common element. This further points to the need for investigating workplace loneliness through the lens of recognition theories. This is an opportunity that I find attractive and intend to capitalize on in this thesis.

Fourth, I reviewed the critical and philosophical work of management scholars Jana Costas and Rasmus Johnsen. These scholars were chosen for their contributions to the academic progress on existential workplace phenomena analogous to loneliness. By examining Costas's and Johnsen's work, I wanted to find inspiration for how to design a qualitative study of workplace loneliness within management and organization theory. Here, I noted the advantages of Costas's qualitative empirical approach and Johnsen's call for more interpretivist phenomenon-centric research. I also hope to contribute to Costas's and Johnsen's work by projecting some of their concerns onto a more everyday familiar phenomenon. Although melancholy and self-alienation are helpful concepts in philosophy and social sciences, they are arguably somewhat exotic to how people construct and categorize their own experiences. Loneliness, on the other hand, seems to be more common in people's repertoire of feelings and thoughts. This approach could make experiences of loneliness easier to capture, and findings may be more relatable to non-academics. However, because there are phenomenal similarities between alienation, boredom, and loneliness, it is important not to echo what has already been done.

Regarding Costas's work on self-alienation, friendliness, and boredom, her overarching approach could be framed as a concern for the inflation of expectations. This is directly transferrable to (workplace) loneliness. Here, it may be hypothesized that neoliberal organizations' emphasis on friendship and family (e.g., Casey, 1999; Brotheridge & Lee, 2006; Costas, 2012) could produce unrealistic

expectations of social intimacy at work, resulting in feelings of loneliness.[52] Because there is potentially a one-to-one transferability of Costas's conclusions on alienation to loneliness, this would not be original research. If I adopted this approach, I would merely be testing whether Costas's framework can explain loneliness in organizations. In saying this, I do not mean to dismiss Costas's research: I recognize that loneliness may be caused by misaligned expectations and perceptions. How organizations contribute to this is a sound research problem, but it will not be the emphasis of my empirical study. Where I hope to offer novel empirical material is not on what causes workplace loneliness but on how it is experienced and coped with.

In summary, the potential contribution of this thesis lies at the intersection of these four research contexts. Inspired by Costas's empirical work and heeding Johnsen's and Lindebaum's call for more phenomenon-driven research in organization and management theory, I have chosen a qualitative and interpretivist approach. Using this approach, I intend to extend qualitative workplace emotion literature with a new perspective on workplace loneliness. Drawing on popular emotion models in workplace emotion literature, I also approach loneliness as a constructed phenomenon that involves a range of experiential, cognitive, and behavioral activities, including a set of cultural and structural implications (see Hochschild, 1990; Moors, 2009). That is, I am concerned with what feelings, thoughts, and behaviors people associate with workplace loneliness as well as the potential organizational implications of the emerging construct. Moreover, by studying loneliness as an abstract emotion, I also aim to contribute to the discussion on expressed versus experienced emotion in the workplace. I also hope to advance both workplace loneliness and belonging research by integrating the two. Ultimately, I seek to contribute to the long-standing debate on what role emotional phenomena play in the workplace and how organizations explicitly and inexplicitly manage this. This outlines my aspirations for this study, which will guide me in the forthcoming chapters.

[52] That unrealistic or misaligned expectations and perceptions can cause boredom, self-alienation, and loneliness could be related to disappointment. Therefore, this approach does not say so much about loneliness and boredom as it says about the phenomenon disappointment: How is disappointment experienced and expressed in different situations? Here, disappointment may arguably be either conscious or subconscious. The potential answer to this is that when disappointment emerges from unfulfilled expectations on social intimacy, it may express itself as loneliness; when disappointment emerges from unfulfilled expectations on fun and stimulating activities/work, it may express itself as boredom. This can further be transferred to an array of situations and can potentially explain any negative experience (although not all negative experiences).

3. Perspectives on Loneliness

This thesis investigates the role of loneliness in organizations through three research questions:

How do people experience workplace loneliness?

How do people cope with workplace loneliness?

Why do people feel lonely at work?

Although all three questions have both empirical and theoretical aspects, the first two questions are primarily descriptive and the third question is explanatory. In practice, this means that I am interested not only in the ways people describe workplace loneliness but also in the internal and external factors that contribute to their experiences and responses. That is, I am not concerned with the events that trigger workplace loneliness but why certain work situations make people feel lonely. This marks a departure from a positivist approach, which seeks to identify causal explanations for workplace loneliness and its effects.

Interpreting why people feel lonely at work is arguably complex, with multiple answers that vary depending on the theoretical lens. In this chapter, I navigate through a myriad of ideas and outline a theoretical framework that will help me address my research questions. As previous research on workplace loneliness has historically been weak in terms of theoretical contributions (see Firoz et al., 2020), I look beyond management literature for additional theoretical insights. To this end, I review a wide range of philosophical and sociological literature as theoretical tools that can shine a light on why people experience workplace loneliness. Through this literature review, I identify three perspectives: loneliness as the result of (and source of) self-alienation; loneliness as a symptom of social alienation;[53] and 3) loneliness as a desire for recognition. In this chapter, I introduce these perspectives separately and highlight how they are used, both individually and jointly, in the forthcoming analysis. Before engaging with the perspectives, I offer a little history of loneliness as a concept. This will also provide insight into how I arrive at the three chosen perspectives.

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[53] In this thesis, I approach alienation as a "disconnection from the self and others" (Monsour, 2017: 7). However, unlike loneliness (as a subjective experience), alienation is not necessarily a feeling but an unfavorable situation or condition that the individual may or may not be aware (ibid). For this reason, I see alienation not as a synonym for loneliness but as a possible antecedent to it.

Loneliness and social isolation may be issues of particular concern in our digitalized age, but as phenomena, they have fascinated philosophers throughout history. Going as far back as the Hellenistic period, Aristotle (330BC/2008), for example, argues that the individual who enjoys social isolation must be either a beast or a god.[54] Although this is an argument with implications for my thesis (which I will return to later), it does not necessarily address loneliness. As noted, loneliness should not be understood as the situation of being alone. On this, the Roman philosopher Cato the Elder wrote that "he was never less alone than when alone" (in Cicero, 44BC/2014: 271), emphasizing the distinction between being alone and feeling alone (in this case being lonely). Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus (108/1907) makes a similar observation:

> [Loneliness] is a certain condition of a helpless man, for because a man is alone, he is not for that reason also [lonely]; just as though a man is among numbers, he is not therefore not [lonely]. (p. 227)[55]

In other words, the lonely condition Epictetus refers to has little to do with whether one is alone and may even be more acutely experienced in the company of others. This offers profound insights into the phenomenon and resonates with how loneliness is generally understood in academia today. That said, writings from the Hellenistic period on loneliness are somewhat muddled, as Latin and Ancient Greek make no clear distinction between aloneness, solitude, and loneliness.[56] The term "lonely" did not emerge until Shakespeare's (1609) play *Coriolanus*,[57] and the concept "loneliness" was not widely adopted until the 19th century.[58] For these reasons, loneliness has been called a modern construction (Bound-Alberti, 2019) and might not apply to historical literature. As demonstrated above, although these

[54] The full quotation reads as follows: "The man who is isolated, who is unable to share in the benefits of political [social] associated association, or has no need to share because he is already self-sufficient, is no part of the polis [society], and must therefore be either a beast or a god" (p. 36).

[55] In the original translation, "solitude" is used in place of "loneliness." However, since this translation was made (1907), solitude and loneliness have shifted meanings. To avoid confusion, I have modified the quotation.

[56] According to Google translate, aloneness, solitude, and loneliness all translate to "solitude" in Latin. Similarly, the Greek word *monaxiá* (μοναξιά) can be used for aloneness, solitude, or loneliness.

[57] "My mother, you wot well/My hazards still have been your solace: and/Believe't not lightly–though I go alone,/like to a lonely dragon, that his fen makes fear'd and talk'd of more than seen–your son/Will or exceed the common or be caught/With cautelous and practise" (Act IV, Scene 3). As Shakespeare uses both alone and lonely, lonely denotes something more than simply being alone. Nonetheless, Shakespeare still associates loneliness with the state of being alone.

[58] See https://books.google.com/ngrams with the variables "loneliness," "years 1600–2019," "English (2019)," "Case-Insensitive," and "Smoothing of 3." Note that the prevalence of "loneliness" has surged since the beginning of the 21st century, but the prevalence of the term "alone" has remained relatively stable over the past five centuries.

ancient thinkers did not have the vocabulary to denote loneliness, they arguably captured the spirit of it.

More recently, a philosopher who has been influential in defining loneliness as a distinct concept is Rubin Goetsky (1965). Goetsky champions the separation between solitude, isolation, and loneliness: "[Solitude is] that state or condition of living or working alone [. . .] without the pain of loneliness or isolation being an intrinsic component of that state or condition" (Goetsky, 1965: 236). Here, Goetsky conceptualizes loneliness as a pain but also argues that this pain is not an inevitable part of being alone. Anticipating Goetsky, theologian Paul Tillich (1963) concludes that "[l]anguage [. . .] has created the word 'loneliness' to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word 'solitude' to express the glory of being alone" (p. 11). Both Goetsky and Tillich see solitude as a kind of pleasure and loneliness as the corresponding suffering. Moreover, although these writers emphasize the distinction between aloneness and loneliness, they still correlate the two.

In line with Goetsky and Tillich, contemporary neuroscientists frame loneliness as social pain or social hunger that has evolved to protect the individual from the dangers of isolation (e.g., Cacioppo, 2009). This supposes that the pain of loneliness exists to remind the individual to reintegrate with the group much like how regular hunger reminds her to eat. From this perspective, loneliness can be seen as an emotional response to social isolation and social alienation (as an antecedent to social isolation/abandonment). This is in line with Weiss's (1973) Situational Theory of Loneliness and is one of the perspectives I will consider in this chapter. However, in Chapter 1, I note that this naturalist perspective has been criticized by phenomenologically oriented philosophers who instead see loneliness as inescapable and purposeless existential solipsism (see Moustakas, 1961/2016; Mijuskovic, 2012). On this, Mijuskovic (2012) makes the following observation:

> Any attempt to distinguish, or contrast, the terms "aloneness," "isolation," and "solitude" is futile, since all of these references, properly understood, are reducible to the more primordial form of "fear of loneliness." (lviii)

Further contesting the evolutionary function of loneliness, both Moustakas and Mijuskovic argue that any ambition to escape loneliness will only lead to self-alienation and more suffering, like how the pursuit of happiness is often self-defeating (Moustakas, 1961/2016: ix; Mijuskovic, 2012: 88). Instead, these authors draw attention to the appearance (experience) of loneliness, and champion the virtue in being able to tolerate the inevitable pain that comes from being

existentially severed from other Beings (see also Hegel, 1807/2008).[59] Other existentialist philosophers have expressed similar attitudes toward loneliness and analogous phenomena (see Kierkegaard, 1849/1989: 45; Schopenhauer, 1851/2017: 105; Nietzsche, 1886/1999: 106). Although these thinkers have been influential in the study of other workplace phenomena (e.g., see Johnsen, 2009, 2016), they have yet to be used to address workplace loneliness. And so, even with centuries on its neck, this literature may hold relevant insights into why people experience loneliness in the workplace. In short, the common denominator in these philosophers' writings on loneliness is that they frame it as a kind of self-alienation. This perspective contrasts with the previously noted (social) approach, which is also fleshed out in this chapter.

From another angle, these two perspectives – i.e., social alienation and self-alienation – can be seen as a split between a collectivistic and individualistic concern for loneliness. The social perspective suggests that a that a life deprived of community is a lonely existence, while the individualist perspective holds that no number of social relationships can replace a compromised self-relation (i.e., self-community). Therefore, I refer to these perspectives as the "social perspective" and "individualist perspective" of loneliness going forward. In a grander scheme of things, these two viewpoints reflect the enduring debate on whether people are social or unsocial creatures (e.g., Hobbes, 1651/2014; Rousseau, 1755/2004; Kropotkin, 1902/2009). Although I do not engage too intimately with this historical discussion, I do believe that loneliness potentially offers a piece of the puzzle of people's seemingly bilateral nature. As I demonstrate in this chapter, I am not alone in thinking this. On this note, it has even been argued that loneliness is a manifestation of excessive forms of either collectivism or individualism (Buber, 1942/2005). In contemporary psychology, this paradoxical "unsocial sociality"[60] is

[59] Hegel (2008) makes the following claim: "True reality is merely this process of reinstating self-identity, of reflecting into its own self in and from its other, and is not an original and primal unity as such, not an immediate unity as such. It is the process of its own becoming, the circle which presupposes its end as its purpose, and has its end for its beginning: it becomes concrete and actual only by being carried out, and by the end it involves [. . .]. While the embryo is certainly, in itself, implicitly a human being, it is not so explicitly, it is not by itself a human being (*für sich*); man is explicitly man only in the form of developed and cultivated reason, which has made itself to be what it is implicitly. Its actual reality is first found here" (pp. 30–31).

[60] Addressing people's bilateral nature, Kant (1784/1991) concludes that "[people have] a tendency to enter the social state, combined with a perceptual resistance to that tendency which is continually threatening to dissolve it." Schopenhauer (1851/2017) makes a clear reference to this with his Porcupine Dilemma (popularized as the Hedgehog's Dilemma), which reads as follows: "One cold winter's day, a number of porcupines huddled together quite closely in order through their mutual warmth to prevent themselves from being frozen. But they soon felt the effect of their quills on one another, which made them again move apart. Now when the need for warmth once more brought them together, the drawback of the quills was repeated so that they were tossed between two evils, until they had discovered the proper distance from which they could best tolerate one another" (Schopenhauer, 1851/2017: VII). Albert Einstein (1949) borrowed Kant's concept of unsocial

sometimes referred to as a dialectic tension (see Baxter, 1990). This perspective draws on the idea that experience is constructed from opposing desires and needs (Baxter, 2004; see also Bakhtin, 1929/1984) and that all thoughts and behaviors derive from these internal conflicts (ibid). In this context, loneliness could be considered the dialectical tension between connection (collectivism) and autonomy (individualism) (see Baxter, 1990). This is an aesthetic model that foreshadows my empirical material, but it is not helpful toward addressing why people experience workplace loneliness.

Meanwhile, a sociological theory that effectively addresses and operationalizes this tension is Axel Honneth's (1992) Theory of Recognition. In short, Honneth (1992) argues that people need intersubjective recognition to form a positive self-relation. Honneth's Theory of Recognition solves the conflict between the social and individual aspects of loneliness and offers a nuanced approach to the *'why'* of workplace loneliness. The relevance of recognition theories to my study is further highlighted by previous research that has found a link between absent recognition and loneliness at work (Stoica et al., 2014). That is, it is reasonable to believe that recognition may be a fundamental component of workplace loneliness that previous research has not thoroughly investigated. For this reason, I will engage with Honneth's (1992) and Francis Fukuyama's (1992) recognition theories as the third perspective of my theoretical framework.

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This chapter should not be viewed as me establishing a predefined theoretical framework that I intend to neatly fit the empirical material into. As I explain in the next chapter (Methodology), my approach to analysis is abductive and iterative. That is, I move back and forth between my empirical material and theory to make sense of the phenomenon and address my research question(s). Consequently, this theoretical framework is as much the result of the study as it is a tool for it. This also implies that the perspectives in this chapter have already been selected for their relevance to my empirical material. Finally, to reiterate, I take this theoretical approach because it is necessary for addressing my third research question: Why do people experience workplace loneliness? The theoretical framework still provides valuable insights into comprehending how people experience and cope with workplace loneliness, but the main application of these three perspectives is to

sociality: "Man is, at one and the same time, a solitary being and a social being. As a solitary being, he attempts to protect his own existence and that of those who are closest to him, to satisfy his personal desires, and to develop his innate abilities. As a social being, he seeks to gain the recognition and affection of his fellow human beings, to share in their pleasures, to comfort them in their sorrows, and to improve their conditions of life. Only the existence of these varied, frequently conflicting, strivings accounts for the special character of a man, and their specific combination determines the extent to which an individual can achieve an inner equilibrium and can contribute to the well-being of society."

extrapolate my research participants' narratives to investigate the underlying explanations for their experiences and coping behavior. The operationalization of these perspectives will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. In this chapter, I present the three perspectives in a semi-chronological order, beginning with loneliness as a consequence (and source) of self-alienation.

Self-Alienation and Loneliness

Before Weiss (1973) popularized the "situational theory of loneliness" (see Chapter 2), loneliness was generally perceived as a manifestation of self-alienation (see Eddy, 1961). From this perspective, loneliness comes about when a person struggles to identify with how she perceives herself (Moore, 1976). Such a model strips loneliness of its social component and offers an answer to why isolation can be both pleasurable and painful (see Tillich, 1963; Goetsky, 1965). Addressing this, political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1978) makes the following observation: "Solitude is that human situation in which I keep myself company. Loneliness comes about when I am alone [. . .] without being able to keep myself company" (p. 185). As with Goetsky and Tillich, Arendt distinguishes between solitude and loneliness, but she suggests that the latter is a sign of poor self-relation. Drawing on this, it could be proposed that whether a person tolerates social isolation depends on how much she enjoys her own company. Epitomizing this perspective, Schopenhauer (1851/2017) makes the following arguments:

> A man can be himself only so long as he is alone, and if he does not love [isolation], he will not love freedom, for it is only when he is alone that he is really free. (p. 102)
>
> People are rendered sociable by their inability to endure [isolation], that is to say, their own society. They become sick of themselves. It is this vacuity of soul which drives them to intercourse with others [. . .]. (p. 105)

Here, Schopenhauer opposes the idea that humans have an inherent social need by claiming that great individuals need nothing but themselves. Similar attitudes can be found in the works of Thoreau (1849/1993) and Brunton[61] among others. These thinkers pose an interesting moral question: Should the isolated (and lonely) individual be pitied or envied? The poet Charles Bukowski forms a similar question:

[61] For example, British Philosopher Paul Brunton (1898-1981) bluntly describes the issue: "Solitude is strength, to depend on the presence of the crowd is weakness. The man who needs a mob to nerve him is much more alone than he imagines." This is a famous quotation is attributed to Brunton, but there are no official recordings of it.

> And when nobody wakes you up in the morning, and when nobody waits for you at night, and when you can do whatever you want. What do you call it, Freedom or Loneliness?

Taking a slightly different approach to the writers above, Moustakas (1961/2016) explicitly embraces loneliness by arguing that the cause for self-alienation is people's "fear of loneliness" (which he refers to as loneliness anxiety*)* (L508). Elaborating on this, Moustakas suggests that any attempt to overcome loneliness will only result in self-rejection as the individual futilely turns outward for a quick fix (ibid). Instead, he argues that people must accept loneliness (L528-230),[62] and by doing so, they gain deeper awareness and sensitivity of their own existence (L1028). To Moustakas, loneliness is an inescapable and purposeless condition (L688), but he suggests that this experience is fundamental to an individual's self-realization. Extending this position, Mijuskovic (2012) argues that the human desire to escape loneliness is a universal source of motivation and that "[all] thoughts as well as the actions of all men can be interpreted as a desire to avoid the feeling of existential, human isolation" (p. lvii). Moustakas's and Mijuskovic's writings on loneliness also remind us to reconsider how we evaluate the phenomenon: Are we categorizing loneliness as negative solely because it is painful or because it is detrimental to an individual's being? According to the thinkers above, loneliness, while often experienced as an ache, is a positive phenomenon that should be embraced rather than avoided.

An analogous sentiment can be found in proto-existentialist Søren Kierkegaard's writings on despair. Kierkegaard (1849/1989) argues that experiencing despair is the greatest misfortune and misery yet insists that the ability to despair is man's advantage over beasts and therefore holds infinite merit (p. 45). Kierkegaard elaborates that while despair is unavoidable, being aware of this "sickness" is one step closer to curing it (ibid). Although Kierkegaard's despair is not synonymous with loneliness, they are arguably related. In this context, despair is a sickness of the spirit (p. 54) that is the result of being alienated from God. A secular interpretation of this would be that despair is a kind of self-alienation, like loneliness.[63] Drawing on Kierkegaard and Moustakas, some people could be lonely

[62] Full quotation: "Modern man does not enjoy the companionship, support, and protection of his neighbors. He has been sharply cut off from primary groups and from family and kinship ties. He lives in an impersonal urban or suburban community where he meets others not as real persons but according to prescribed rules of conduct and prescribed modes of behavior. [. . .] Modern man is starving for communion with his fellow man and with other aspects of life and nature. [. . .] The fear of loneliness is an acute problem today because man has lost his world and he has lost his experience of neighborliness and community life. He experiences a feeling of alienation from the human world about him and he suffers from a corroding feeling of estrangement" (Moustakas, 1961/2016:L528-530).

[63] In another work, Kierkegaard (1847/2009) elaborates that God is the love between two individuals (pp. 112–113). The relationship with God, therefore, may also be interpreted as a deep intersubjective relationship with another person; and despair or loneliness is the lack of it.

without realizing it. From this perspective, those who acknowledge their loneliness may be considered more aware of their existential condition than those who do not.[64] Kierkegaard highlights a complementary perspective of this in his writings on anxiety. Unlike despair, Kierkegaard (1844/2015) believes anxiety is the sign of a great and free spirit (p. 51):

> [Discovering anxiety] is an adventure that every human being has to live through, learning to be anxious so as not to be ruined either by never having been in anxiety or by sinking into it. Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate. (p. 187)

> [Anxiety is] absolutely formative, since it consumes all finite ends, discovers all their deceptions. [. . .] Anyone formed by anxiety is shaped by possibility, and only the person shaped by possibility is cultivated according to his infinitude. (p. 188)

Kierkegaard's view is not unlike Aristotle's[65], Schopenhauer's, and Moustakas's sentiments about the merit of overcoming the fear of loneliness and isolation. From this position, it may be suggested that learning to be lonely in the right way, as in not becoming consumed by it (self-alienated), is the ultimate freedom. Influenced by Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche (1886/1999) picks up this line of reasoning:

> The greatest person should be the one who can be most lonely, most hidden, most deviant, the man beyond good and evil, the master of his virtues, abundantly rich in will. This is what greatness should mean: the ability to be both multifarious and whole, both wide and full. (p. 106)

In other words, Nietzsche suggests that people's fear of loneliness makes them conform to social norms, and the person who does not dread loneliness may break free from these invisible chains. This is Nietzsche's *übermench* (he who is neither master nor slave), a view that resembles Aristotle's superhuman (he who does not need society) and Moustakas's (1961/2016) loneliness as a catalyst for self-

[64] It should be noted that the diagnostician's approach is not entirely unproblematic. Kierkegaard write that "[c]ommonly a person is assumed to be healthy if he himself does not say that he is ill; even more so if he says he is well. A physician, on the other hand, looks on the illness differently. And why? Because the physician has a definite and articulate conception of what is to be healthy. [. . .] For a physician's task is not just to prescribe medicines, but first and foremost to diagnose the sickness. [. . .] similarly with the psychic expert's relation to [existential illness]. He knows what [existential illness] is, he is familiar with it and so is not satisfied with a person's declaration either that he is [existentially ill] or that he is not" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1989: 53). But treating an existential condition the same way as a physical condition is arguably a somewhat positivist approach to a subjective phenomenon.

[65] Consider the earlier quotation and Aristotle's following words: "He [the virtuous man] is his own best friend and takes delight in privacy whereas the man of no virtue or ability is his own worst enemy, and is afraid of solitude" (in Durant, 1926/1962: 77).

realization. To summarize, the common denominator across the writers above is that they approach loneliness from an existentialist and individualist point of view. Such a position supposes that collective life is a burden that leads to self-alienation. Therefore, any solution to loneliness can only be found by withdrawing and turning inward.

A sociologist who has popularized this perspective of loneliness is David Riesman. In his book *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman (1950/2001) expresses woe for the US citizen becoming increasingly conformist. According to Riesman, this trend has produced a generation of shallow youths who lack the "capacity to go it alone" (pp. 25–26) and are driven by an "insatiable [. . .] psychological need for approval" (p. 22). This, Riesman argues, is the source of growing loneliness in American communities. Riesman further argues that people who are "other-directed" (i.e., extroverted) are only capable of superficial relationships and often deprive themselves of self-esteem by overconforming (p. 306). Riesman, taking an individualist perspective, suggests that a society (or organization) oriented toward collectivist (or social) values creates a crowd of lonely people.[66] In line with the other thinkers in this section, Riesman's solution is that people must become autonomous because only when a person has a stable self and is independent of others can loneliness be escaped (p. 242, 307). Here, Riesman also notably points out that interdependence potentially makes people vulnerable to loneliness. And so, the individualist perspective not only provides a theoretical explanation for why people feel lonely at work but also presents a solution to workplace loneliness.

In short, the individualist perspective suggests that a lack of autonomy and an intrusive demand for conformity can make people lonely at work. This perspective also recalls Costas's (2009) research on self-alienation and integrates her concerns to expand the individualist position. Here, it may be speculated that anything that inhibits the individual from expressing her authentic self may contribute to feelings of workplace loneliness. This could, for example, include fulfilling a specific role, adhering to ethical norms, maintaining a professional and formal façade, and managing emotions. Because, according to this perspective, if the individual feels self-alienated, no level of community and social intimacy can outweigh this pain. By acknowledging people's need for a positive self-relation and pointing to several common work-related antecedents to self-alienation, the individualist perspective offers one potential answer to why people feel lonely at work. While Moustakas's and Mijuskovic's phenomenological studies diverge from the rest of the individualist perspective, their arguments are complementary to the concern for

[66] Riesman is not content with the opposite either–i.e., the "inner-directed" (i.e., introverted) character, who he claims dominated the 19th century. Riesman believes that the inner-directed individual is equally fated to loneliness because she remains dependent on others yet is incapable of drawing strength from peers (p. 67).

loneliness as a kind of self-alienation, as they advocate the same solution (i.e., for the individual to turn inward). There is more to be said about this perspective on loneliness, and I expand on it in the analysis (Chapter 6). Next, I introduce the second perspective: viewing loneliness in the light of social alienation. This perspective assumes a diametrically opposing view to the individualist approach, and offers another plausible explanation for why people experience loneliness at work.

Social Alienation and Loneliness

Seeing loneliness as an emotional response to social alienation was a common theme in the literature I reviewed. This perspective draws on the idea that humans are naturally social beings (e.g., Kropotkin, 1902/2009) and that estrangement from collective life causes a kind of anguish (i.e., loneliness). Weiss's (1973) situational theory of loneliness (see Chapter 2) is central to this perspective, but his analysis is preceded by political sociologists who note a gradual shift of cultural values in the western world. Retrospectively investigating this, sociologist Robert Putnam (2001), in *Bowling Alone*, demonstrates that the average US citizen has gradually withdrawn from society since the 1950s (which is, interestingly, the same year as Riesman's *Lonely Crowd* was published). Putnam frames the issue as "the erosion of social capital" (p. 111), a kind of social alienation, and suggests that it has caused a recession of health, safety, wealth, and intelligence in the US (p. 287) as well as has lowered self-esteem, increased loneliness, and increased general sadness (p. 332). According to Putnam, this social decline is taking place in all domains of American society: the family, community politics, church, leisure, and the workplace.

The social disconnection and anonymity that previously only characterized the most crowded cities now permeates all aspects of people's social lives (Putnam, 2001: 207). Witnessing this transformation, sociologist Philip Slater (1970/2006) voices his concerns in *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, where he adopts the opposite position to Riesman's (1950/2001) approach. Slater (1970/2006) believes that the US is becoming increasingly individualistic and argues that this explains escalating loneliness (pp. 8–9). According to Slater, individualism leads people to see peers as inconveniences, impediments to their own freedom (p. 12). This mindset can produce frustration and reinforce a vicious cycle that estranges people from one another (pp. 49, 119):

> Much of the unpleasantness, abrasiveness, and costliness of American life comes from the fact that we're always dealing with strangers. This is what bureaucracy is: a mechanism for carrying on transactions between strangers. (p. 10)

This is an argument with tremendous implications for workplace loneliness: Slater is essentially saying that modern social systems bring people together while keeping them apart and, in doing so, become a breeding ground for social alienation and loneliness. Pointing to humankind's history of living in communities and tribes, Slater argues that far-reaching personal autonomy and independence is inherently incompatible with human nature (p. 8). Possibly responding to Riesman (1950/2001), Slater (1970/2006) offers the following explanation:

> The more we try to solve our problems by increasing personal autonomy, the more we find ourselves at the mercy of these mysterious, impersonal, and remote mechanisms that we have ourselves created. (p. 48)

In other words, when people are liberated from each other, the price they pay is an increased dependency on systems and technology to coordinate their lives (ibid). This perspective suggests that, as interpersonal freedom is pursued, people become lonely slaves to bureaucracy and machines[67]. Putnam (2001) arrives at a similar conclusion.

Anticipating Slater and Putnam, philosopher Martin Buber argues that political emancipation and technological progression have inevitably led to increased social alienation and loneliness:

> The degradation of families, workgroups, villages, communities, and fraternities is the price for the continuous political emancipation of the individual since the French Revolution and the emergence of the bourgeois society. Along with this, the loneliness of mankind grows. (Buber, 1942/2005: 77–78, my own translation, Swedish to English)

According to Buber (1942/2005), rapid industrialization and urbanization have created communities that are too large for members to establish meaningful relationships with all of each other (p. 78). Consequently, they begin to rely on formalized rules and contracts as well as machines and systems to co-exist (p. 79). But Buber also points out that when social systems grow, bureaucratization and division of labor may be necessary to maintain social stability. With a similar concern, sociologist Émile Durkheim (1897/2002) argues that excessive division of labor and the erosion of traditional values cause the individual to suffer a condition he called anomie (p. 215; see also Durkheim, 1893/2014). Durkheim frames anomie as normlessness and "derangement" (see Mestrovic, 1997): a cultural and moral estrangement that may lead to destructive behavior such as egoism, deviance, and suicide (Durkheim, 1897/2002; see also Merton, 1938). There is a significant overlap between loneliness and anomie as both may be rooted in social alienation and isolation (see Bell, 1957: 106). When I delve into recognition theories, the

[67] A parallel discussion on this can be found in appendix A.2, *Is the Swede Human?*

connection between Durkheim's concept of anomie and loneliness will become even more evident.

The writers above see social alienation and isolation as a source of emotional pain (i.e., loneliness). As noted, a scholar who has been prominent in popularizing this perspective is social psychologist Robert Weiss (1973) with his typology of social loneliness and emotional loneliness. Moreover, Weiss frames loneliness as a subjective social isolation caused by the individual's negative evaluation of her social environment. Although this points to the link between social alienation and loneliness, it suggests that feeling lonely has little to do with one's surroundings but everything to do with how one interprets one's social milieu. The subjective aspect of interpretation could explain why some people never feel lonely and other people feel achingly lonely even in situations that others consider more than adequate. From this perspective, one solution to loneliness (in and out of organizations) would be to readjust maladapted perceptions and misaligned expectations for social intimacy (see Cacioppo et al., 2015; Wright, 2015).

The social perspective of loneliness is also aligned with recent research in neuroscience that observes brain activity as people experience what they call loneliness. Here, loneliness seems to be linked to increased fight-and-flight hormone norepinephrine (Cole et al., 2015) as well as elevated dopamine release and uptake (Mathews et al., 2016; Vitale & Smith, 2022). As dopamine is responsible for motivation (see Berridge & Robinson, 1998), this supports the theory that loneliness has evolved to motivate humans to seek out social gratification and avoid isolation (see Cacioppo, 2009). Although the relationship between loneliness (as social isolation) and dopamine activity is complex[68] (Vitale & Smith, 2022), these findings are consistent with the idea that humans are social beings that have thrived in groups, tribes, and communities for millennia. From an evolutionary perspective, loneliness as motivator for social integration, has possibly been promoted by natural selection (see Cacioppo et al., 2014).

Being backed by plausible scientific explanations increases the legitimacy of this perspective, but it can also lead to a simplified view. For example, an individual's subjective experience can be difficult (if possible) to explain biologically, but this does not mean it is any less real. On this note, neuroscientific findings of loneliness problematize Weiss's (1973) idea of loneliness as a subjective phenomenon, suggesting that people's susceptibility to loneliness is influenced by heritable genes (Cacioppo, 2009: 24). There may be some conflicts here, but either way, all literature reviewed in this section points to loneliness being an emotional response

[68] Although acute loneliness and social isolation seem to be correlated with increased dopamine activity and social seeking behavior, chronic exposure to loneliness may have the opposite effect, increasing social anxiety and hypervigilance, rendering social interactions more stressful (Vitale & Smith, 2022).

to social alienation as an antecedent to abandonment and isolation. Interestingly, this perspective offers a very different answer than the individualist approach to why people experience loneliness in the workplace.

Whereas the individualist perspective suggests that loneliness can be solved by increasing autonomy and reducing human friction, the social perspective (or collectivist approach) seems to propose the exact opposite. According to the writers above, the pursuit of autonomy fosters superficial and functional relationships that lead to social alienation and loneliness. Projecting Buber's and Slater's concerns onto the workplace, one can conclude that individualized work potentially produces a greater desire for even more individualized and autonomous work, and through this cycle, workplace loneliness grows as interactions in the workplace involve increasingly less human contact and collaboration. This formalization and dehumanization of social spheres is a topic that has attracted much attention from critical theorists. The Frankfurt School scholar Theodor Adorno (1949/2005), for example, laments over organized charity replacing genuine altruism,[69] and poststructuralist Jacques Derrida (1993) echoes Aristotle's "O friends, there are no friends" when criticizing hierarchical relationships as inherently alienating.[70] Similar opinions have been expressed by Albert Camus[71] and even Nietzsche (1954/2005: 169).[72] Building on this, the social perspective on loneliness points to organizational factors such as hierarchy and far-reaching division of labor and how these may foster a sense of disconnection between colleagues.

In this chapter, I have presented the social and individualist perspectives as antipodes, but this is a viewpoint I will challenge as I move forward. To help me on this path, I draw inspiration from Buber (1942/2005), who considers both individualism and collectivism to be manifestations of people's loneliness. Here, Buber (1942/2005) suggests that individualism only sees a human being in relation to herself and spares her from despair by glorifying loneliness (p. 146). Collectivism, on the other hand, numbs the feeling of loneliness by stripping the individual of her identity (p. 147). In short, individualism distorts loneliness and

[69] Adorno (1949/2005) writes, "[w]e are forgetting how to give presents. Violation of the exchange principle has something nonsensical and implausible about it; here and there even children eye the giver suspiciously, as if the gift were merely a trick to sell them brushes or soap. Instead, we have charity, administered beneficence, the planned plastering over of society's visible sores. In its organized operations there is no longer room for human impulses, indeed, the gift is necessarily accompanied by humiliation through its distribution, it's just allocation, in short, through treatment of the recipient as an object" (p. 42).

[70] Derrida (1993) writes, "[i]f there is indeed a promised friendship, alas, 'there is no friend'. [. . .] [real friendships] are not this 'sovereign master friendship,' and this is why 'there is no friend,' no friend worthy of the name, in those friendships" (p. 236).

[71] The following poem is attributed Camus: "Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow. Don't walk behind me, I may not lead. Walk beside me, just be my friend."

[72] Nietzsche (1954/2005) writes, "Are you a slave? Then you cannot be a friend. Are you a tyrant? Then you cannot have friends" (p. 169).

collectivism hides it, but neither solves it. Advocating a "third way," Buber suggests that people are neither collectivistic nor individualist creatures but beings that emerge in the space between two subjects. This phenomenon is generally referred to as intersubjectivity (ibid). Elaborating on this in another book, Buber (1954/2011) argues that people become who they are by interacting with others;[73] when people see each other as objects, they become alienated and existentially lonely (p. 108, 111, see also Buber, 1942/2005). Sartre (1960/2004) uses the term "serialized" to describe this condition (see also Sartre, 1983/1992). Such a perspective effectively integrates self-alienation with social alienation by suggesting that social alienation causes self-alienation as the socially alienated individual will also be deprived of a constructive self-relation. This perspective offers a potential nuanced and complex explanation for why people feel lonely at work, and it is a position I will explore in depth in the next section alongside sociological recognition theory.

Intersubjective Recognition and Loneliness

In the preceding sections, I explored how perspectives on social alienation and self-alienation offer valuable insights into why people experience loneliness in the workplace. A third concept, intersubjective recognition, may offer further insight into this topic. As previously mentioned, research has identified a link between unmet recognition needs and workplace loneliness (Stoica et al., 2014). Recognition also proves to be a compelling framework for my investigation as it unifies the individualist and social perspectives, suggesting that individuals require intersubjective recognition to establish a positive self-relation (see Honneth, 1992). It has been argued that intersubjective recognition allows the individual to learn about herself through the eyes of others (see Sartre, 1946/2007). This process is crucial for identity formation; when recognition is lacking, defective, or denied, the

[73] Approaching loneliness from an existentialist perspective, Buber (1923/2008) conceived mankind as having access to two separate worlds: the I-You world and the I-It world (p.53). What he meant by this, is that when people think of themselves as subjects, they always do so in relation to something else, and this 'other' may be one of two things: an object (an *it*) or another subject (a *you*). Buber elaborated that *I-You* makes up the world of relation and the I-It is the world of experience (p. 59-60). While individuals exist by themselves, Buber argued that it is only when people engage in a genuine I-You relationship that they truly come alive as human beings. From this perspective, people become who they are in the interaction with another subject. To Buber, it is not enough to simply utter the word *You* to establish an I-You relationship (p. 85), but one has to engage its whole Being with the other person. While the I-You world is ideal, Buber did not believe that people can live in it permanently. Instead, he argued that it is necessary to move between the world of relation and the world of experience (p. 85). But because the I-You world is demanding, and the I-It world is comfortable, people tend to stay in the I-It world for too long and forget how to return to the I-You world. This is what Buber believed had happened; people had become too comfortable in the superficial and material world of experience and lost their ability to engage in genuine I-You relationships (p. 87, 96). While a Being cannot be lonely in the I-You world, because I-It is an alienated relationship, Buber saw mankind as existentially lonely (p. 108, 111, see also Buber, 1942/2005).

individual may suffer emotionally (Taylor, 1992; Honneth, 1992: 2). In this context, loneliness can be perceived as the emotional response to insufficient or refused recognition. Recognition theories, therefore, shed light not only on the individual's relation to the experience but also on its origins and possible organizational implications. In this section, I will examine two complementary perspectives on recognition: Honneth's struggle for recognition and Fukuyama's desire for self-worth (via recognition). Although neither theory explicitly addresses loneliness, my goal is to highlight their unique relevance to my study. Specifically, I will demonstrate how Honneth's notion of solidarity and Fukuyama's concept of isothymia help explain why people feel lonely at work.

Honneth's Struggle for Recognition

Central to the field of sociological recognition theory is Axel Honneth's seminal work, *The Struggle for Recognition* (1992), which draws on the intellectual legacies of both Hegel and Mead. In this text, Honneth posits that recognition is not a mere peripheral concept but is foundational for comprehending individual and group behavior in the social sciences. Honneth (1992) argues that the pain of denied recognition, or disrespect, pushes the individual to seek the recognition she thinks she deserves (p. 23). That is, people pursue ethical behavior in hopes of being recognized as good and valuable members of their collective. From this perspective, ethical life is governed by mutual recognition, and without people's desire for intersubjective acknowledgement, social order would collapse (p. 91). This theory also implies that the struggle for recognition is at the heart of all social conflict (p. 28). Therefore, recognition as theorized by both Hegel and Mead before Honneth[74] possesses a capacity to coordinate and shape social systems. Given the significance of this proposal, it is worth examining the relationship between loneliness and recognition, as recognition's potential coordinating role may also extend to the phenomenon of loneliness.

In distinguishing between different modes of recognition, Honneth (1992) proposes three types of desired recognition: love, legal, and solidarity.[75] To Honneth (1992),

[74] Where Honneth (1992) departs from his predecessors is on the question of whether the progression of division of labor facilitates a fair distribution of recognition or aggravates inequality (p. 122). Whereas Hegel and Mead believe that a division of labor enables individuals to find unique and valuable functions in society, Honneth argues that jobs are not valued equally, so the division of labor leads to increasing inequality of recognition (ibid). For Honneth, although division of labor fosters internally symmetrical (i.e., intra-group) relationships, it creates externally asymmetrical (i.e., inter-group) relationships (p. 123). In other words, the division of labor unites people who recognize each other as equals (in terms of function and value) but creates a rift between different classes and occupations.

[75] Taylor (1992), a contemporary political theorist, has also written about recognition from a Hegelian perspective. Like Honneth (1992), Taylor (1992) proposes three forms of desired recognition: recognition as equal beings (politics of universalism), recognition of unique cultural (group) features (politics of difference), and recognition of individuality (pp. 38–42).

these modes of recognition provide the individual with distinct species of self-relation that are necessary to maintain a positive self-identity (p. xii). Here, love largely corresponds with Weiss's (1973) social and emotional loneliness: the idea that individuals need intimacy and friendship to establish a sense of self-confidence (Honneth, 1992: 118). Conversely, absent or denied recognition for being a "lovable person" may produce feelings of emotional and social loneliness. Legal recognition, on the other hand, refers to the individual's legal rights and status and facilitates self-respect (p. 120). When legal recognition is denied, the individual may experience marginalization, discrimination, and powerlessness. Although some scholars have referred to this as a kind of loneliness (e.g., Hertz, 2020), this may be taking the concept too far. This is because legal recognition is not an intersubjective mode of recognition but a universalized respect and dignity (Honneth, 1992: 118). Therefore, denied legal recognition is unlikely a source of experienced loneliness, at least in the workplace. Rather, denied legal recognition could even bring a group of marginalized people together and facilitate a sense of solidarity. This leads me to Honneth's (1992) third mode of recognition – solidarity. For Honneth, solidarity is central for a person to establish self-esteem (p. 128). What makes Honneth's solidarity particularly interesting to my thesis is that it addresses a social dimension that Weiss (1973) downplays in his model of loneliness. Unlike Weiss's social and emotional loneliness, solidarity seems to be more relevant to the workplace and therefore deserves attention.

Honneth (1992) describes solidarity as a feeling of pride and honor collectively shared among members of a particular group (p. 128). In addition, Honneth believes that for an individual to experience this collective pride, she must first feel like a valued member of her group. Whereas pre-modern communities typically granted membership based on shared distinctive properties and territory (p. xviii), individuals generally need to devote themselves to the common good to be esteemed in modern industrialized societies (p. xvii). This has been addressed at length by sociologist Max Weber (1905/2014) in his concept of the Protestant Ethic. From this perspective, modern social membership must be understood as individualized as it hinges on the individual's effort and contribution. However, to contribute with something valuable, the individual must also share basic values with the other group members, or she will not know how to direct her effort (Honneth, 1992: 126). Consequently, for solidarity to be established, the individual not only needs to be culturally united with her peers but also feel like a unique and special member of the group (ibid: xvi). Therefore, solidarity is both an individualized and collectivizing mechanism manifesting as a desire for both autonomy and connection.

Although Honneth (1992) believes that solidarity is denied (disrespected) through denigration and insults (p. 129), the process is arguably more subtle. Here, Taylor

(1992) introduces nonrecognition and misrecognition to explain that the absence of recognition and the wrong kind of recognition, also harms the individual's self-image (p. 25). All this suggests that recognition is a highly complex phenomenon that involves both the individual's perception (e.g., feelings, thoughts, and expectations) and other people's behaviors (e.g., demeanor,[76] words, and actions). In other words, while the need for recognition is arguably universal, it is also both cultural and subjective and therefore immensely difficult to measure. This resonates with how loneliness has been approached so far in this thesis and supports the hypothesis that the absence of desired solidarity may manifest as feelings of loneliness. This is a possibility that Weiss (1973) overlooks in his theory of loneliness. As noted, recent loneliness research has acknowledged a kind of "collective loneliness" (see Cacioppo et al., 2015),[77] but only briefly and not in the context of work. While research on workplace belonging has touched upon this, it has arguably only scratched the surface. As the desire for recognition and solidarity potentially addresses the how and why of workplace loneliness better than emotional loneliness and social loneliness, this is an opportunity for me to make a theoretical and empirical contribution.

Perhaps, the emerging kind of (collective?) loneliness stems from either missing a common value foundation (i.e., the individual does not know how to contribute value) or being unable to contribute what the group considers valuable. This is also what Durkheim (1897/2002) points to with his concept anomie: when an individual is culturally alienated, she struggles to act ethically. When an individual finds herself in such a situation, she not only suffers social alienation (as she feels unappreciated by her immediate group) but also suffers from a compromised self-image. By offering this complex model, Honneth's (1992) recognition perspective integrates both previous perspectives of loneliness – i.e., social alienation and self-alienation. Therefore, invoking recognition theories may provide a fresh perspective on workplace loneliness and address the root cause of its emergence. Simultaneously, since recognition theories rarely consider the experiential dimension, a qualitative study on the experience of workplace loneliness may return the favor by offering insights into how denied recognition is experienced. Thus, Honneth's (1992) struggle for recognition and solidarity (as a mode of recognition) will be central to my forthcoming analysis and discussion. However, Honneth's perspective is not the only recognition theory offering valuable viewpoints for my thesis on workplace loneliness.

[76] A relevant Swedish word here is *bemötande*, which essentially encapsulates every aspect of intersubjective interaction. Here, "being recognized as an equal" could be translated to "*att bli bemött som en like*" (i.e., to be treated as an equal).

[77] Collective loneliness has been explained by the outermost layers of Dunbar's (2014) social network model, which suggests that people maintain weak ties (using Granovetter's (1973) term) with a large group of people (see Cacioppo et al., 2015).

Fukuyama's Desire for Self-Worth

In addition to Honneth, political scientist Francis Fukuyama (1992) addresses recognition and solidarity. Like Honneth (1992), Fukuyama (1992) builds his theory on Hegel's concept of recognition, which Hegel notedly borrowed from Rousseau (see Ripstein, 1994: 447). Rousseau first addresses the issue of recognition when describing *amour propre,* a kind of self-worth (or self-love) that stems from being compared with and recognized by others (Delaney, 2005). As with Honneth's (1992) solidarity, *amour propre* largely corresponds with Buber's (1923/2008, 1954/2011) intersubjective person; however, like Riesman's (1950/2001) other-directed character, *amour propre* comes with a bitter connotation. Rosseau believes that while people's desire for self-worth (derived from mutual recognition) can be directed toward ethical goals, it can also be corrupted (Delaney, 2005). This highlights a shortcoming of Honneth's (1992) theory: Honneth believes that the end goal of social struggle is to establish symmetrical relationships (i.e., the inferior fights to equalize her status), but he does not explicitly address why people's appetite for recognition (and power) may not always be satiated by achieving equality.[78] Neither does Honneth address why some people may turn to unethical acts as a means of receiving recognition and attention. Here, Fukuyama (1992) adds to the case by building on Rousseau and invoking the term thumos (or thymos) as a fundamental desire for recognition but not the only kind of desire for recognition.

Historically, thumos has been used to describe urges and passions (see Wiener, 1973: part II)[79] and broadly corresponds with how emotion is used today (Dixon, 2003). Therefore, philosophical writings on thumos can be seen as precursory to the study of emotion. Drawing on this, Fukuyama (1992) conceptualizes thumos as the emotional response to desired recognition (p. 165). Like Honneth, Fukuyama (1992) suggests that thumos, as a passion for self-worth (self-esteem), "drives men to seek recognition" (p. 166) and that this is a fundamental motivational force in society. Elaborating on this, Fukuyama (1992) defines two kinds of thumos: isothymia and megalothymia.[80] Here, isothymia can be compared with Honneth's (1992) solidarity: it reflects people's desire to be recognized as equals (Fukuyama, 1992: 287–295). Fukuyama (1992) consequently frames isothymia as a noble desire for basic dignity (p. 289) (i.e., honor in Hegel's and Honneth's terms).

[78] Honneth (1992) believes that "feelings of superiority" was a natural part of feeling valued and is not mutually exclusive with "feelings of being an equal" (e.g., see p. 88).

[79] Here, thumos, together with *nous* (intellect) and *epithumia* (appetite), forms Plato's triad of the human soul (Wiener, 1973: part II, *Psychological Ideas in Antiquity*; see also Plato's the *Republic*, Book IV, 439e).

[80] Fukuyama (1992) also notes the close link between thumos (desire for recognition) and *epithymia* (appetite/desire/affection), and how this relationship shapes his concepts megalothymia and isothymia (see p. 369). It should also be noted that, in Christian literature, the concept epithymia (or epithumia) often has a negative connotation and is associated a desire for the forbidden (i.e., lust).

Megalothymia, on the other hand, emerges when isothymia becomes corrupted, and people instead desire to be recognized as superiors (p. 182). According to Fukuyama (as also for Rousseau), corrupted thumos (i.e., megalothymia) is the result of social and economic inequality – i.e., a structural denial of people's isothymia.

The process Fukuyama (1992) describes could be summarized as follows: when isothymia (i.e., solidarity) is denied, people experience shame, low self-esteem, and loneliness. This emotional and social pain pushes the individual to seek more recognition, and when overcompensated, may lead to megalothymia and pride (p. 21). The same perspective can be generated by combining Riesman's (1950/2001) and Slater's (1970/2006) theses or drawing on Nietzsche's (e.g., 1886/1999) polarized philosophy. Like Fukuyama (1992), these thinkers associate loneliness with both pride and shame and note that asymmetrical relationships can be distressing (e.g., Nietzsche 1954/2005: 169). Looking at loneliness through recognition theories also reiterates Moustakas's (1961/2016) and Mijuskovic's (2012) arguments that loneliness has a motivational dimension. Another obvious overlap with previous research is that workplace loneliness can be caused by bullying and denigration (i.e., denied recognition or disrespect) (see O'Reilly et al., 2015; Dussault & Frenette, 2014). Hence, integrating loneliness with Honneth's (1992) and Fukuyama's (1992) perspectives on recognition is not far-fetched but perhaps fundamental to making sense of why people experience workplace loneliness. Because, through this lens, loneliness is not just a personal experience; it is also a mechanism that shapes social systems (such as organizations). This is where loneliness becomes imperative to emotion in organization research concerned with the role (and exploitation) of emotions in the workplace.

As previously argued, approaching loneliness from a perspective of (absent or denied) recognition effectively integrates the diverse accounts of loneliness reviewed in this chapter. Therefore, invoking recognition theories will be helpful when interpreting loneliness, especially in situations where Weiss's (1973) emotional and social loneliness are not applicable. Given that most people try to keep their personal and work lives apart (see Clark, 2000), the workplace may be a place where people do not mainly suffer from an unfulfilled desire for friendship and love but from a missing sense of solidarity and isothymia. Here, recognition theory can shine a light on both the individual's experience of workplace loneliness and the underlying reasons for why people experience loneliness in the workplace. Furthermore, recognition theories offer insights into the potential role of loneliness in organizations by pointing to how people's capacity for loneliness may shape (and is shaped) by organizations.

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the theoretical tools that will help me interpret the empirical material and answer my research questions. I compiled three relevant perspectives on loneliness: 1) a consequence (and source) of self-alienation; 2) a symptom of social alienation; and 3) a desire for recognition. Whereas the first perspective suggests that loneliness is kept at bay by nurturing a solid self-relation, the second suggests that loneliness arises due to a perceived lack of community. Both these point to loneliness being associated with subjective security, either through feelings of self-efficacy, solidarity, or both. The third perspective integrates these two positions by proposing that the most effective way to build self-esteem, as well as community, is through appreciative intersubjective recognition. Together, these perspectives offer three distinct, although related, explanations of why people experience loneliness in the workplace and are deployed in my analysis later in this thesis.

My goal in this chapter is to emphasize the bilateral and paradoxical qualities of loneliness and that these dialectical tensions potentially shape people's experiences as well as behaviors in organizations. Through my review of loneliness in philosophy and sociology, I also deal with the wide range of thoughts and attitudes that may be associated with loneliness in and out of organizations (e.g., individualistic and collectivistic tendencies). With this in mind, the theoretical framework at hand may be operationalized toward all three of my research questions, although it centers on the 'why' dimension. Therefore, the proposals made in this chapter should not be considered hypotheses that I intend to test but as a foreshadowing of the empirical material and my analysis. More about this in a moment.

A theme that emerged frequently in this literature review is the possible motivating effect of loneliness. Virtually all the writers discussed in this chapter frame loneliness as a kind of motivator, either toward prosocial behavior (e.g., gregariousness) or antisocial behavior (e.g., withdrawal). This resonates with Honneth's (1992) idea that ethical life is governed by a struggle for recognition. From this perspective, the individual pursues intersubjective recognition to keep loneliness at bay. However, as Nietzsche (1886/1999) suggests, the person who has no need to be recognized as an ethical member of the group is also free to deviate from ethical rules. Therefore, some people might cope with loneliness by trying to dismantle their need for recognition. Either way, both approaches point to a performance-related or normative dimension of loneliness (and recognition) that has significant implications for critical management research concerned with emotional exploitation and control. Although I briefly discuss this in the context of workplace belonging in the previous chapter, no management literature to date (and to my knowledge) emphasizes this aspect of workplace loneliness. On this note,

Arendt (1951/1976) offers a unique and interesting comment on how loneliness may be used for social control. Specifically, she believes loneliness is a process that can be exploited to domesticate the individual and make her submissive to fascism:

> What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the ever-growing masses of our century. [. . .] totalitarian domination tries never to leave him alone except in the extreme situation of solitary confinement. By destroying all space between men and pressing men against each other, even the productive potentialities of isolation are annihilated; by teaching and glorifying logical reasoning of loneliness where man knows that he will be utterly lost if ever he lets go of the first premise from which the whole process is being started, even the slim chances that loneliness may be transformed into solitude and logic into thought are obliterated. (1951/1976, p. 176)[81]

Once again, Arendt turns loneliness into a social phenomenon. Here, loneliness is not synonymous with isolation, as isolation may even be a remedy for the most acute forms of loneliness. Instead, she emphasizes that the direst loneliness emerges when people are atomized and anonymized yet brought forcefully together, a sentiment that is shared by Nietzsche and Slater, among others. When this is put in motion, people's need for community and individuality are exploited as they are denied both. In this situation, people become alienated and lonely, unable to organize themselves against an oppressive authority.[82] Drawing on both Nietzsche and Arendt, I understand loneliness as a possible way for organizations to influence and coordinate their members (either normative or authoritarian). Integrating this with Honneth's (1992) and Fukuyama's (1992) perspectives suggests that loneliness could be exploited by denying (or facilitating) recognition in the

[81] A similar dystopian picture was composed in Orwell's *1984*, where the protagonist O'Brien explains how the new society will be created: "Do you begin to see, then, what kind of world we are creating? It is the exact opposite of the stupid hedonistic Utopias that the old reformers imagined. A world of fear and treachery and torment, a world of trampling and being trampled upon, a world which will grow not less but more merciless as It refines itself. Progress in our world will be progress towards more pain. The old civilizations claimed that they were founded on love or justice. Ours is founded upon hatred. In our world there will be no emotions except fear, rage, triumph and self-abasement. Everything else we shall destroy–everything. Already we are breaking down the habits of thought which have survived from before the Revolution. We have cut the links between child and parent, and between man and man, and between man and woman. No one dares trust a wife or a child or a friend any longer" (Orwell, 1949/2009: 289-280).

[82] On this note, contemporary philosopher Lars Svendsen (2009) argues that the people who lived in the Soviet Union suffered badly from loneliness because no one could be trusted (Svendsen, 2009: 66). That is, because people under totalitarian regimes do not know who might be an informant, they hide their true selves and opinions from everyone.

workplace. This shines further light on the potential role of loneliness in organizations. Next, I discuss the metatheoretical and practical aspects of my study.

4. Study Design

In the previous chapters, I formulated my research aim, reviewed relevant literature, and outlined the theoretical framework that will help me answer my research questions. I also conceptualized loneliness, established an appropriate methodological foundation, and identified the academic debates that my research can contribute to. Collectively, this forms the point of departure for my empirical study. To reiterate, I address the role of loneliness in organizations by empirically investigating how people experience and cope with workplace loneliness as well as by exploring theoretical explanations for why they feel lonely at work. The next step in this project is to review the methods and metatheoretical assumptions that have shaped my research. I begin by discussing the implications of my research philosophy and then move on to describe the process behind the empirical study.

Research Philosophy

Before considering methodological commitments, researchers are generally advised to first reflect on their metatheoretical assumptions (see Dervin, 2003). Metatheory can be approached in many ways, but a common model is dividing it into ontology (nature of reality), epistemology (limits of knowledge), and axiology (goals of research) (Laudan, 1984). While a researcher may choose freely from conflicting principles and methods across these dimensions (Feyerabend, 1975/2010), Laudan (1984) argues that sound research philosophy must harmonize commitments. When harmony is achieved, this constitutes a paradigm (using Kuhn's (1962/1996) term) (Laudan, 1984). Here, organization theory is sometimes called a scientifically immature field of study due to being a paradigmatically diverse and flexible discipline (e.g., Pfeffer, 1983; Donaldson, 1995; Van Baalen & Karsten, 2012). At the same time, other scholars celebrate paradigmatic pluralism and argue that different perspectives do not invalidate one another but are complementary (see Patterson & Williams, 1998). In line with the latter, I believe that a strength of management and organization theory lies in its ability to draw from a wide range of philosophies, theories, and methods to produce general rather than specific understandings. That said, as paradigmatic assumptions are not predetermined in organization theory, this makes stating my research philosophy even more important.

Metatheoretical Assumptions

In the previous chapters, I emphasized that previous research on workplace loneliness is predominantly positivist and quantitative. This literature is concerned with measuring, predicting, and controlling workplace loneliness but has overlooked experiential, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of the phenomenon. This oversight is surprising considering the emerging trend of conceptualizing loneliness as an emotional phenomenon constructed from various feelings, thoughts, and

behaviors as well as the cultural and structural implications of these (e.g., Perlman & Peplau, 1982; Hochschild, 1990, Moors, 2009). Consequently, I identified a need for more qualitative research on workplace loneliness and formulated three relevant research questions. Moreover, I chose to ally myself with the constructed emotions perspective, which argues that emotions are not discrete objects but the result of subjective and cultural categorization processes. In line with this, I believe that loneliness should be understood as what people describe as loneliness. I draw this from Wittgenstein's (1958) theory that the meaning (essence) of words lies in how they are used (see Stein & Tuval-Maschiach, 2015: 7).[83]

My approach aligns me with constructivist ontology, which suggests that knowledge is actively constructed by people as opposed to being "out there" to be discovered (see Howard, 1991; Mick & Buhl, 1992). This position has also been referred to as a nominalist ontology: the belief that there is no objective reality[84] (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2019: 4). Although this perspective is inclusive, it also makes loneliness difficult to define and delimit, as the associated activities may overlap with a range of other phenomena, such as social and self-alienation, boredom, melancholy, anxiety, and anomie. Therefore, some conceptual fuzziness (i.e., relativism) must be tolerated in ontologically constructivist research (see Fox, 2001: 26). This also implies that the researcher's subjectivity plays a significant role in interpreting the phenomenon. By acknowledging this constraint, it has been argued that researchers can avoid naïve empiricism and common-sense realism (ibid).

It should also be noted that my research interest originates from my personal experience of workplace loneliness, so I see myself as inseparable from the research problem. That is, I am distancing myself from a dualist epistemology, which suggests that the researcher can avoid influencing (and be unaffected by) the observed phenomenon. Rather, I am aware that I co-produce the understanding of the phenomenon as it appears to me rather than simply describing it. Similarly, I recognize that writing this dissertation has not been a linear endeavor but more akin to a circular (iterative and abductive) hermeneutic process (see Patterson & Williams, 1998: 288). This epistemological position is often referred to as anti-positivism (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2019: 5), as opposed to positivism. As mentioned earlier, positivism implies an ambition to measure, explain, and predict the (social) world through correlations and causal relationships. Meanwhile, anti-positivism is concerned with interpreting the meaning of the (social) world (ibid). From an anti-positivist approach, the goal is not to gather verifiable truths but to consider the verisimilitude (i.e., the appearance of being true) of the phenomenon

[83] On this, Wittgenstein writes that "essence is expressed by grammar. [. . .] Grammar tells what kind of object anything is" (*Philosophical Investigations*, #371, 373).
[84] As opposed to a realist ontology.

being scrutinized (see Amsterdam & Bruner, 2000: 30; Bruner, 1991: 4). This also means that replicability must be forfeited, and that reliability and validity need to be established in another way (Sandberg, 2005). I will return to this in a moment.

Moreover, in my role as a researcher and my research in society, I understand that my social position and demographic profile comes with privileges. Several ethical implications arise from this, which I will consider throughout this chapter, but a central concern for me is to not stigmatize or victimize my research participants in any way. On this note, I try to draw a line between sympathy and empathy. Although sympathy is arguably benevolent in intent, it can also be patronizing and degrading when it manifests as pity. In addition, I see empathy as the capacity to share another person's experience as one's own (see Davis, 1995: 12). In other words, empathy is the ability to put oneself in another person's shoes: to understand a person's desires, emotions, and motivations even when one disagrees with them. From this point of view, empathy is fundamental to interpreting lived experiences and therefore another of my epistemological commitments. It has been argued that what separates the natural scientist from the social scientist is the ability to empathize with the research problem or subject (Von Wright, 1971: 28-29). That is, the social scientist must acknowledge her emotional response to the phenomenon under study if she wants to understand it (ibid). In addition, it is also important to recognize the limits of one's empathic capacity and not fool oneself into thinking that an experience can be wholly understood without living through it.

The discussion on empathy also overlaps with Laudan's (1984) third dimension of metatheory: axiology. In this context, axiology denotes not only the goals of a research project but also a recognition of what is considered valuable research and good researcher behavior (Biedenbach & Jacobsson, 2016). Axiology highlights that epistemological commitments tend to be shaped by the researcher's moral and political values (Patterson & Williams, 1998: 288). In other words, the axiological position justifies epistemological assumptions (ibid: 286). Here, an axiological position supporting epistemological anti-positivism is anti-foundationalism – a belief that science should be evaluated based on its persuasiveness and insightfulness rather than consistency and reliability (ibid).

Because I believe meaning lies in interpretation and communication, I subscribe to this view. In this thesis, this commitment manifests as an aspiration for aesthetic quality and wit. However, a strong ambition for persuasiveness can also be problematic as it borders on manipulation. To avoid this, I try to highlight both the strengths and weaknesses of different perspectives rather than championing a single perspective. Moreover, although I have an affection for creative ways of expression, I try to avoid excessively embroidered language and unnecessary jargon. In the late stages of my research journey, I have intentionally made this thesis less technical and abstruse. The result is a significantly simpler text than I originally produced,

but I see this as a positive thing as it makes the writing and the ideas more accessible to different kinds of reader. And this is a final axiological commitment that I believe in: research should be accessible to non-academics. Now, this does not mean that the academic community should be circumvented; my primary target audience is other scholars, after all.

In addition to Laudan's (1984) triangular model (ontology, epistemology, and axiology), Burrell and Morgan (1979/2019) point to an important philosophical crossroad regarding a researcher's view of human nature: Are people free-willed agents or is behavior (and experience) predetermined? (p. 6). In short, I believe that what is important is not whether free will exists but the fact that individuals experience free will. My position can thereby be understood as compatibilism, which is arguably what most social researchers subscribe to in some form (see Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2019: 2). Compatibilism also relates to my ontological position and the decision to approach loneliness as a constructed phenomenon. In the context of my research, this translates into concerns such as whether the participants choose loneliness and whether they feel like they are in control of their situation, feelings, and perceptions.

An alternative approach is to categorize human experience as either an emergent narrative or a predictable result of the situation (see Arnould & Price, 1993). Here, I sympathize with the former, which may be referred to as a narrativist view of experience (Patterson & Williams, 1998: 288). That is, I seek out emotional narratives rather than prioritize "rational" recollections of potential causes and effects. This commitment is influenced by Johnsen's (2011) opinion that deterministic and information-based research models rarely correspond with lived experiences and may obstruct grasping the subjective meaning of phenomena. My commitments outlined here are not necessarily a rejection of objectivism[85] or determinism but rather an epistemological acknowledgment that research is limited to the subjectivity of the researcher and the research participants. In other words, an objective reality could exist although unavailable to humans' limited senses.

The Interpretive Paradigm

Compiling the research philosophy outlined above, my assumptions and commitments align with the Interpretive Paradigm as described by Burrell and Morgan (1979/2019). According to Burrell and Morgan, this paradigm rests on German idealism and owes much to Weber's and Simmel's work (pp. 227-228).[86]

[85] Here I am not referring to Ayn Rand's philosophy, Objectivism, but to the idea that there exists an objective (non-subjective) world or reality that represents facts and absolute truth.

[86] Other contributors to this movement are Giddens (1984, 1987), Bourdieu (1990), and Foucault (1972) (see Sandberg, 2005).

By incorporating elements of hermeneutics (interpretive theory)[87] and phenomenology,[88] interpretive social scientific research aims to understand (*verstehen* in Weber's terms) rather than categorize, measure, and predict (Burrell and Morgan, 1979/2019). As understanding is a subjective activity, this implies that the researcher becomes integrated with the research process and interprets the phenomenon through herself (see Gadamer, 1975/2004). Therefore, interpretive social scientific scholars aspire to achieve validity by bridging the gap between idealism and positivism (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2019: 229). Underscoring this aspect of interpretivism, Dilthey (1910/2010) argues that what separates natural sciences from human sciences is that the latter investigate lived experiences (pp. 23-24).[89] In this context, I understand the study of lived experiences not as the attempt to capture experience as it is lived but to inquire into how people reflect on and construct their experiences (see Marshall & Rossman, 2011: 104). This approach encompasses the perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that

[87] Hermeneutics is often understood as interpretive theory and was originally a method for making sense of biblical texts and later came to also be used for legal texts (Gadamer, 1975/2004: xx). Hermeneutics has since then been exported to the social sciences as an interpretivist method to challenge the naturalist idea that human actions can be viewed and studied the same way as natural phenomena (e.g., see Dilthey's works, 1833-1911). Gadamer (1975/2004) similarly argues that hermeneutics is not concerned with generating verifiable knowledge but rather captures (as well as relies on) human understanding. Heidegger (1962/2001) also argues that hermeneutical practice is circular, where the researcher understands an object by understanding herself and vice versa (p. 195). Gadamer (1975/2004) concludes that ultimately all understanding is a matter of self-understanding (p.251).

[88] Phenomenology is traditionally understood as the science of consciousness and emerged as a critique of naturalist tendencies in psychology (see Husserl, 1912/1982: xvii). Central to phenomenology is an activity called "Phenomenological Reduction" (also known as *epoché*), where the researcher brackets her judgment of the external world before drawing attention to how phenomena appear in the consciousness (Cogan, 2006). However, the value of phenomenological reduction is contested. Some phenomenologists argue that because all phenomenological descriptions involve interpretation and all interpretations are subjective, phenomenological reduction (as Husserl believes) is impossible (see Heidegger, 1962/2001: 61). However, Heidegger suggests that researchers should turn to their unique experience as human beings (*Dasein*) for answers (see Ruin, 2005: 13). On this note, hermeneutics and phenomenology converge (Heidegger, 1962/2001), but the phenomenological movement remains scattered. Throughout my doctoral journey, I have tried to engage with the phenomenological method (e.g., Spiegelberg, 1965, 1994; Moustakas, 1990; Woodruff Smith, 2013), but to this day, I do not consider myself versed enough to invoke it properly. I realized along the way that although phenomenology centers on experience, I do not need to deploy phenomenology to study lived experiences.

[89] Dilthey (1910/2010) writes the following: "The human-historical world as it confronts us in the human sciences is not a copy, as it were, of a reality existing outside it. The cognitive process cannot produce such a copy. It is and remains bound to its means of intuiting, of understanding, and of conceptual thinking. Nor do the human sciences want to produce such a copy. Rather, they refer what happens and what has happened–the unique, the contingent, the momentary–to a system of value and meaning. As it progresses, conceptual cognition seeks to penetrate this system ever more deeply. It becomes ever more objective in its grasp, without ever being able to surpass its own essence, namely, it can experience what is only through re-feeling and re-construing, through connecting and separating, through abstract systems and a nexus of concepts" (pp. 23–24). Here, Dilthey echoes that interpretive research is not concerned with reproducing an objective reality (or facts) but aspires to understand the (value and) meaning-making process.

people associate with an experience (see Chandler & Munday, 2011). While this arguably links idealism and positivism, a narrated lived experience should not be approached as an objective depiction but as a representation of an individual's meaning-making process (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; see also Lichtman, 2010: 79).

Similar to my outlined metatheoretical assumptions above, Burrell and Morgan (1979/2019) defined interpretivism as an anti-positivist and constructivist research movement (p. 253). The authors also note that this paradigm implies a methodological commitment to ideography – the ambition to get close to the research object and grasp the unique complexities of the phenomenon, as opposed to the *nomothetic* approach, which seeks to produce generalizable statements (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2019: 6). In the context of the interpretive paradigm (and drawing on Weberian terminology), my research agenda could be reframed as grasping the spirit of workplace loneliness. In other words, I am interested not only how loneliness moves through the individual but also how it manifests in social action and (organizational) structure. According to Burrell and Morgan (1979/2019), the interpretivist approach allows social scientists to study phenomena without reverting to positivist reification (p. 230), an approach that aligns with my conceptualization of both loneliness and emotions (see Chapter 1).

Elaborating on the necessity for empathy in interpretivist research, both Simmel (with *Einfühlung*) and Weber (with *Verstehen*) emphasize that interpretation is not an emotionless ("rational") process but an empathic recreation of the phenomenon (Von Wright, 1971: 6–7). This is particularly important for a study on workplace loneliness as loneliness researchers often distance themselves from their research participants and sometimes cast the phenomenon as exotic (see Weiss, 1973). Therefore, I celebrate my own experiences of loneliness as valuable to this research project, and I strive to be transparent about how my personal experiences of loneliness influence my interpretation. At the same time, my subjectivity limits my ability to understand. For example, as a member of the cultural majority where I live, I am not equipped to fully grasp experiences of loneliness in people from minority and marginalized groups, despite how much I wish I could. As noted, although I think we must always extend our empathy as far as possible, if I want to stress empathy as imperative for interpretation, it is also vital that I recognize the limits of my empathic ability.[90] Here, I understand that my strength lies in interpreting experiences of loneliness that arise despite the individual's distinctive properties being aligned with the group. Weiss (1973) draws attention to this: "Are there times when even those whose lives are in every way adequate nevertheless experience loneliness?" (p. 229), a question to which he had no answer. Ultimately,

[90] For example, while I may sympathize with the pain of childbirth, as I have not experienced it myself and never will, it is difficult for me to empathize fully with it (understand the experience).

this affects what research participants I should seek, which I discuss later in this chapter.

Although the interpretivist paradigm has become increasingly popular within management and organization theory over the past decades, the methodological progress has not necessarily kept up (Sandberg, 2005). In this regard, Sandberg (2005) argues that scholars under the interpretivist umbrella often do not take their ontological and epistemological commitments seriously (p. 42–43). Sandberg problematizes interpretivist research: although grounded in phenomenological philosophy, interpretivist research often seeks to establish validity and reliability based on positivist criteria, such as replicability and objectivity (see also Giorgi, 1994). According to Sandberg (2005), this weakness makes interpretivist research an easy target for critique. To address this criticism, interpretivist scholars must find new criteria that align with their research philosophy. Here, Sandberg proposes communicative validity, pragmatic validity, and transgressive validity, including reliability as interpretive awareness, as principles compatible with interpretivist methodology (p. 54).

Furthermore, Sandberg (2005) suggests that communicative validity can be achieved by involving the research participants to a greater degree, for example, by informing them about the intent and design of the study (p. 55). Through this, the research participant can provide methodological input and indirectly approve the research approach by agreeing to participate. This establishes a "community of interpretation" between the researcher and the research participants (Sandberg, 2005; see also Apel, 1972). Meanwhile, pragmatic validity can be achieved by anchoring the research phenomenon in real-world scenarios and situations, for example, by avoiding leading questions and asking questions that encourage the research participant to describe lived experiences in an undistorted or unfiltered way (Sandberg, 2005: 56). Finally, transgressive validity can be obtained by suppressing the desire for coherent and consistent interpretations (p. 57). Here, Sandberg (2005) argues that the researcher must become aware of her biases and assumptions, which limit understanding. For example, Sandberg proposes the use of irony as a constructive way to "interrupt and disturb our present interpretations in such a way that we become aware of the codes that have guided us in producing them" (p. 58). This also relates to Sandberg's perspective of reliability as awareness of the researcher's subjectivity (p. 59). Although I do not explicitly deploy irony in this thesis, I systematically try to challenge old ways of looking at things, not because I reject traditional explanations and definitions but because I think exploring alternative perspectives is an effective way to increase understanding.

Another approach to transgressive validity is defying the otherwise dominant "male imagery" in management and organization theory by emphasizing female lived experiences alongside male ones (Sandberg, 2005: 58). One way I address this is

by systematically referring to the generic person as she/her.[91] Additionally, my focus on emotions, feelings, and subjective experiences in the workplace can be seen as a departure from the idea of organizations as a "masculine" and "rational" arena (see Fineman, 2000). Moreover, while I would like to think that my sex (male) and gender (man) are irrelevant to this study, ignoring this topic arguably reinforces the status quo. It is, therefore, difficult for me to assume a "neutral" position. One way to address this would be to explicitly invoke feminism (e.g., Acker, 1990, 1992) or queer theory (e.g., Butler, 2002). Although I sympathize with this approach, it would serve little practical use toward my research aim to take this stance. I also do not want to alienate loneliness experiences in men as doing so would arguably be a loss and potentially polarizing. As touched on in Chapter 1, the high prevalence of loneliness in (young) men could perhaps explain some of the sexist and xenophobic tendencies in this group (e.g., in the case of incels). I will return to this later in this thesis, but this hints at the implications of my findings. Rather, I have chosen to take the opposite route and not record the age, sex, gender, sexuality, or ethnicity of my research participants. This may seem counterintuitive as it obscures potential categorical discrimination, but it is also arguably the most respectful approach as I treat each individual as a unique person. Furthermore, in my analysis, I intend to emphasize the competing aspects of loneliness narratives. By capitalizing on the pluralism of how people experience and describe loneliness, I also adhere to Sandberg's (2005) approach to transgressive validity.

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In summary, by adopting the interpretive paradigm, I approach workplace loneliness from a constructivist angle with the ambition to generate an understanding that makes sense even to the person who has not experienced workplace loneliness. To achieve this, I aim to capture a broad range of loneliness experiences, including associated feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. The methods I used to accomplish this will be discussed in a moment. First, I will consider the empirical context and further ethical implications of my study.

Empirical Context

To delimit the empirical context, I have chosen to focus on how Swedish workers experience loneliness. This decision is based on my access to and understanding of this demographic group, as I am a Swedish resident and citizen myself. To establish cultural and linguistic coherence in the empirical material, I have also opted to exclude English-speaking expats working in Sweden. This aligns with my ambition to interpret loneliness that emerges despite the individual appearing to be integrated with the group. For the same reason, I only studied people who had experienced

[91] A potential side effect of the approach I have taken is that it might sound as if I am implying that predominantly women experience loneliness, which is not my intent.

loneliness in the vicinity of colleagues. This means that loneliness experienced by remote workers or socially isolated occupations (e.g., electricians, truck drivers, and farmers) are not emphasized. In accordance with this, I prioritize experiences of loneliness in office workers, including white collar and knowledge workers (see Mills, 1951/2002). However, I have not excluded entries from school or medical staff if they fulfilled the inclusion criteria.

These methodological commitments significantly limit the pool of potential research candidates but are necessary because of a fundamental linguistic difference between Swedish and English: Swedish lacks a clear distinction between aloneness and loneliness. This arguably makes it difficult for Swedish speakers to define loneliness but perhaps easier to describe it. When the term for loneliness is ambiguous, people might resort to more nuanced language to communicate the experience. This makes Swedish material on loneliness a gold mine for an interpretivist study. However, this approach also results in a significant methodological implication. From a strict linguistic perspective, I am not studying how people describe workplace loneliness, rather I am studying the construction of the Swedish equivalent: *arbetsrelaterad ensamhet* (workplace loneliness/aloneness). Considering that words arguably acquire their meaning by how they are used (Wittgenstein, 1958), this can be problematic as the Swedish word *ensamhet* has a broader usage than what can be translated as loneliness. Consequently, my findings are perhaps not directly transferrable to an English context.
On the other hand, it is not my intent to study the construction of loneliness as a word but as an experience (and the cognitive and behavioral activities people associate with this experience). I argue that despite linguistic differences, the spirit of the phenomenon transcends language barriers. Moreover, claiming that English empirical material would be more valid toward addressing my research problem is a claim for reproducibility that goes against my research philosophy. That said, suggesting that "the spirit of loneliness" exists beyond words is also a kind of essentialist reification of the phenomenon, which is also not my intent. Through my empirical study, I am not looking to distill a universal experience or manifestation of loneliness. Rather, I am examining how different people describe what workplace loneliness (as an experience) means to them. Based on this, I analyze similarities and differences and offer some ways to make sense of this.

Moreover, to qualify for the criteria of lived experience, all research participants must identify with the experience (or feeling) of *ensamhet* as opposed to the state of being alone. However, since inquiries into lived experiences involve retrospection (Marshall & Rossman, 2011: 104), research participants do not necessarily need to label an experience "loneliness" as it was lived but can also retroactively construct an experience as loneliness. Elaborating on this, from the

perspective that feelings are conscious evaluations of one's internal (affective/emotional) state, one must have an awareness of loneliness as a concept to label an experience as "loneliness." Therefore, if a person does not keep the label loneliness in her register of feelings, she will not feel it. The affect (i.e., social pain) may still be present but perhaps categorized as something else, such as sadness, anxiety, or boredom. Similarly, a person may misattribute another emotional state to loneliness. This presents a significant ethical implication of this study: loneliness (as a feeling) may be induced in a person who does not already feel/experience it.[92] To address this ethical dilemma, I chose only to seek out people who already recognize their feelings as loneliness, and I did not take the role of a diagnostician. But through my efforts to find people who identify as lonely, these people could be produced. For example, if someone sees an advertisement with the headings "Are you lonely? Then participate in this study," they might reflect on their life and begin to think of their situation as lonely, even if they did not before. This risk cannot be avoided. Consequently, it is possible that the existence of this dissertation is contributing to loneliness in society, because just hearing about this research makes loneliness an object of people's minds. Neither can this risk be avoided, and it is a price that must be paid, or else research on "negative" experiences cannot be conducted.

This marks the reach of the empirical delimitations and considerations in this thesis. As noted, I will not make a case for demographics or categorical data beyond cultural belonging (Swedish) and occupational identity (white-collar and knowledge workers).[93] This is arguably both a strength and a weakness of my study. With respect to the previous discussion on potential differences between groups of people, research suggests that women and men experience and express emotions differently (Deng et al., 2016)[94] and that men often struggle to communicate their experiences of loneliness (see Marangoni & Ickes, 1989). That is, women are more likely to express negative emotions and seek help when feeling lonely (Rotenberg et al., 2002). On the other hand, drawing a hard line between how different sexes

[92] This dilemma may be illustrated by the following scenario: a socially isolated individual feels anxiety and boredom but does not appraise her emotional state as loneliness, so she does not suffer from loneliness. If someone were to tell this person "you must feel terribly lonely, not having any friends," the solitary individual may suddenly begin to think that she should feel lonely. This may produce either an emerging feeling of loneliness or the individual may attribute the previous anxiety and boredom to loneliness. Although this could help the individual improve her quality of life, it could also aggravate it, and in the worst-case scenario (since loneliness is subjective), she becomes lonely by proxy. People might not suffer from what they do not know (i.e., ignorance is bliss). Therefore, one may be better off not knowing loneliness at all and categorize otherwise lonely experiences as less boredom or anxiety, which are less stigmatizing.

[93] Although the empirical material consists mostly of white-collar workers, submissions from a couple of high school teachers are included in the empirical analysis.

[94] This study found that men seem to have more intense emotional experiences, but women have higher emotional expressivity (see Deng et al., 2016).

or genders experience loneliness would arguably be arbitrary and stereotyping, potentially limiting our understanding of how loneliness manifests in organizations composed of diverse people. Therefore, as noted, I approach my research participants as unique individuals. In the empirical chapter, I occasionally refer to research participants as either he or she where I think it facilitates more readable and relatable texts, but these pronouns are assigned by me and should not be considered data.

Finally, although the Swedish language has specific limitations compared to English, its culture is not too different from other individualistic countries such as the US, UK, and Canada (as well as Germany, France, and the rest of Scandinavia) (see World Values Survey, 2022). From this perspective, findings in Swedish empirical material are transferable to a broader Americo-European context. However, one thing that makes Sweden stand out is that Swedish people report relatively low levels of loneliness despite having a notably "cold" social climate (d'Hombres et al., 2021).[95] Interestingly, the loneliest people are found in "warmer" social cultures, such as Spain and Italy (ibid). The linguistic limitation of Swedish is one possible explanation here, but there are other potential explanations, such as social expectations and perceptions, which I consider later in this thesis. For additional notes on the empirical setting, a review of Swedish culture and history can be found in Appendix A.2. *Is the Swede Human?*

Methods of Data Generation

My research process has been a journey filled with twists and turns. I encountered challenges, primarily due to my own flaws and inabilities, but also because of misaligned expectations and external constraints. One aspect that has shaped this study to a great extent is that I had difficulty recruiting research participants. As others have argued, because (workplace) loneliness is stigmatized, it is not easy to get people to talk about their experiences of it (Wright & Silard, 2021). To make matters worse, the Covid-19 pandemic halted my already struggling empirical study and forced me to rethink the project. Whereas I initially aimed for 50 narrative interviews (using Costas's (2009) and Paulsen's (2015) dissertations as a benchmark), I realized that my goal was unrealistic and that I needed to use a mixed approach. After exploring alternatives, I settled on complementing the interviews with (qualitative) surveys and Netnography. Although a mixed approach is arguably not ideal in this case as the diverse formats could complicate the analysis, I discovered that the different methods supported each other in a meaningful way. In

[95] For example, Sweden has the highest number of single households in the world (Eurostat, 2017), and Swedes are often described as shy, boring, and fearful of people (Neander-Nilsson, 1946; Berggren & Trägårdh, 2006/2015).

this section, I walk through each method's strengths, weaknesses, and ethical implications.

Narrative Interviews

To recruit research participants for the interview study, I posted advertisements to notice boards in ten locations in central Stockholm. The heading for the advertisements were in Swedish and stated: "Do you feel lonely at work? Then you are not alone." The advertisement continued with information about the study and asked people to get in touch via email if they could relate. I also advertised the research project on social media (the same online forums that were later chosen for the Netnographic study). In total, I managed to recruit ten people for interviews.[96] To generate material suitable for interpretivist analysis, I chose a narrative inquiry approach (see below) and encouraged the research participants to recount their own experiences of workplace loneliness freely. To facilitate this, I avoided leading questions and gave the participants plenty of room for self-reflection. When possible, I first established rapport by discussing common interests and shared experiences and explaining the purpose of the study. I then initiated the interview by asking the participants to recall a workplace loneliness experience ("Can you tell me about a particular situation that made you feel lonely at work?"). I then asked the participants to describe how they felt during this experience ("Please describe how it felt during and after the situation you just recounted", "What did you think?" "What did you do?" "Was there anything you wanted to do but didn't?"). I also included a few semi-constructed questions such as "What does loneliness mean to you?" and "Who are you when you are/feel lonely?". Here, I am intentionally not asking my research participants to tell me how they cope with workplace loneliness. Rather, it is my ambition to extract this from their narratives. The complete list of interview questions can be found in Appendix E.1. Interview Questions and Survey Structure.

Narrative inquiry (i.e., storytelling) is central to emotion in organization research (Fineman & Gabriel, 1996; Gabriel, 2000; Lindebaum, 2017) and has a respected place in more general qualitative organization theory (e.g., Czarniawska, 1998, 2004; Denning, 2004a, 2004b). In addition, Narrative inquiry has been proposed as the ideal qualitative method for studying (workplace) loneliness (Wood, 1986: 202;

[96] In seven of these, the participants requested to participate in the interview via email. This decision was motivated by it being uncomfortable to talk about loneliness in person and that the asynchronous format would allow for greater time to process the questions. In the email interviews, I provided the interview questions as a document with space for the research participants to fill in their reflections. All seven participants returned the document. Their contributions ranged between 3000 and 8000 words. Follow-up questions were asked via email when necessary. Of the remaining three interviews, two were carried out in person, and one was done over the phone. The personal interviews lasted on average 45 minutes and provided comparable material to the email interviews.

Stein & Tuval-Maschiach, 2015). However, narrative inquiry is not a clearly defined research method (Webster & Mertova, 2007: 6); it can be better understood as a research philosophy that recognizes that people make sense of past experiences through stories (Dyson & Genishi, 1994: 36; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000: 19). Because people structure, categorize, and communicate their experiences through narratives, people's stories offer valuable insights into complex phenomena (Webster & Mertova, 2007: 22; Bell, 2002).

Critics of narrative inquiry typically argue that narratives are subjective, uncertain, and paint the past as either overly positive or negative (see Webster & Mertova, 2007: 20). In other words, stories are emotionally charged, which potentially distorts them from actual events. There is also the risk of misuse as narratives can intentionally be distorted to promote an agenda (ibid). Therefore, it has been argued that narratives lack validity, at least in a traditional sense, and are a somewhat "unscientific" research approach (Hauerwas & Burrell, 1989). On this note, narrative researchers tend to admit that they do not seek verifiable truths, only verisimilitude: the appearance of being true (see Webster & Mertova: 4; Amsterdam & Bruner, 2000: 30; Bruner, 1991: 4). In other words, a narrative is valid if it makes sense and is trustworthy (Webster & Mertova, 2007: 5). Therefore, narratives may be considered individual truths rather than generalizable and quantifiable truth (Webster & Mertova, 2007: 89). If a story does not match the actual event and even if a story is intentionally distorted, a narrative always reflects how an individual chooses to communicate a particular phenomenon or event. This is valuable data for the researcher trying to understand how people construct and categorize lived experiences. The problem, therefore, lies not in the data but in how the researcher approaches the data. As narratives are multidimensional and typically center on scenarios and situations, Sandberg's (2005) pragmatic validity is automatically established.

Although interviews are the traditional method for gathering narratives (see Fineman & Gabriel, 1996), narratives can be collected through a wide range of techniques, such as introspection (e.g., autoethnography), observations (e.g., ethnography), fiction writing, and even surveys. That said, as interviews facilitate a high degree of interaction (and co-creation of meaning) between the researcher and the research participant, they are arguably superior to most other qualitative methods. Interviews are also the method most in line with Sandberg's (2005) communicative validity as the interview interaction provides a unique opportunity for the researcher and research participant to understand each other. However, a downside of the interview approach is that research participants may feel uncomfortable sharing private details when rapport is not established. This is a particularly limiting factor in a study of a stigmatized phenomenon such as loneliness (Wright & Silard, 2021). The stigma around loneliness also raises an ethical dilemma in narrative interviews: participants may have to relive a shameful

and painful experience. If I am careless or aggressive in my interviews, I could potentially inflict emotional harm. Therefore, I was committed to being attentive to the research participants' wishes and requests as well as to protecting their anonymity. For example, if a person preferred to be interviewed via email (rather than in person), I accepted this (see previous footnote). Likewise, if an interviewee was hesitant to disclose specific details, I respected this. If a research participant shared details that can be used to identify her, I anonymized the response further. This potentially limits the empirical material, but it is a necessary ethical step to guarantee the safety of the research participants (see Bell & Bryman, 2007).

As predicted by previous research, recruiting interview participants proved difficult for me. Although ten interviews might be enough to reach data saturation (see Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), it is arguably not an adequate number for a project of this scale, despite the richness of the material. Addressing this challenge, Wright and Silard (2021) advise qualitative loneliness researchers to consider approaches to data collection where individuals may participate anonymously and asynchronously. This encouraged me to investigate qualitative surveys as a complement to the interviews.

Qualitative Surveys

To start, I designed a narrative survey form that mimicked the interview. Here, I prompted the participant to "Describe an event, a period, or situation at work where you have experienced feelings that you think may be related to loneliness. What happened? What did you do? What did you think? What did you feel?". This question aims to inspire the participant to construct a narrative that I can analyze similarly to the interview material. I then distributed this survey to colleagues, friends, and family and asked them to distribute it on social media, hoping for a snowball effect. This only generated five responses; I suspect this lack of responses was because the survey demanded too much from potential participants (as I requested them to submit complete narratives). Once again, I managed to gather material rich in detail but low in quantity. This led me to produce a second qualitative survey with a more approachable structure. Here, I led with semi-structured questions – e.g., "What does workplace loneliness mean to you?" and "How does workplace loneliness affect you?" – with the idea this would help recruit a larger sample and complement the narrative material. See *Appendix E.1. Interview Questions and Survey Structure* for the complete list of survey questions. I distributed this form to my social network again and asked them to distribute the link like the last time. This time, I quickly collected 20 responses, although the answers were relatively short, as expected. Later in the project, I posted a link to the semi-structured survey in relevant Swedish online forums, which generated another ten responses. Eventually, I collected 35 qualitative survey responses. As with the interview study, people were only encouraged to participate if they had firsthand experience of workplace loneliness. As the surveys were dispersed amid

the Covid-19 pandemic when many people suffered from quarantine isolation, participants were asked to recall events from before Covid-19 where they had experienced loneliness in the office.[97]

Surveys are commonly associated with quantitative research, but they can be deployed in qualitative research if the identity and context are preserved for each case (Shkedi, 2004: 109). With this approach, narrative surveys can effectively capture the experiences of a large population and share the benefits of general survey studies, such as accessibility, limited researcher influence, high anonymity, and low cost (ibid). By designing open-ended survey questions that encourage the participants to construct their own narratives, surveys can uncover details that might not have appeared through methods where the researcher has more control over the data (e.g., personal interviews or surveys with closed-ended questions). The anonymity of online surveys may also enable research participants to reveal more vulnerable parts of themselves that might have been kept hidden in a personal interview. Additionally, the asynchronous nature of the online survey format enables the research participant greater time to think about the experiences and events and thoughtfully construct a narrative rather than coming up with a narrative on the spot. However, open-ended questions and survey data limit the control researchers have over who participates, the quality of the responses, and how relevant the answers are to the research problem (Evans & Mathur, 2005; Wright, 2017). In addition, the potential issues with narrative inquiry are amplified when using surveys. That is, surveys make it easier to fabricate stories and an individual can submit multiple stories (Shkedi, 2004). The latter is not necessarily a problem, but it is preferable if each research participant is treated as a single case (ibid). In my study, the qualitative surveys provided a great variety of responses, but I still believed that the material was far from saturated. This led me to seek empirical material already available online.

Netnography

Initially, I began the netnographic study due to the difficulties recruiting research participants, but this material quickly proved to be more than just a substitute. The netnographic project was guided by one question: How is (workplace) loneliness talked about online? I assumed that while people may be uncomfortable disclosing their loneliness experiences with me, many had already shared their experiences of loneliness in online forums. While the interview and survey material provide relatively coherent narratives, the netnographic material offers a great quantity and diversity of loneliness experiences and manifestations. It also provides insights into how people who feel lonely interact socially. The first step of the netnographic study was choosing where to collect the material. I selected the three largest

[97] Almost all research participants understood this request; only one survey response was about loneliness during quarantine. I have excluded this entry from the empirical chapter.

Swedish online forums (Flashback, *Familjeliv*, and a Swedish subforum on Reddit).[98] These communities have a relatively general population and do not promote any political or ideological movement. I intentionally avoided forums that exist for a narrow group of people (e.g., people with mental illnesses or depression) and groups with a strong bias (e.g., anti-work communities) to minimize the risk of over-representing a small but vocal demographic group.

As earlier noted, my ambition was to find as "ordinary" Swedish people as possible who feel lonely at work. After selecting the appropriate forums, I monitored them over a few months without any interaction. I also used the search function on each platform to find historical conversations related to loneliness and work. Through the latter, I found over 40 unique threads on loneliness in Swedish; one of these had more than 15,000 posts, making it one of the largest threads in any Swedish internet forum of all time.[99] After about six months, I started posting in the forums, informing the readers about the study and asking people to share their experiences.

[98] Flashback, the largest Swedish online forum, is known for its harsh language and attitudes such as anti-immigration, nationalism, and misogynism. However, Flashback should not be understood as an "alt-right" or "extremist" forum, as the moderators are politically neutral and the members are diverse. However, Flashback users arguably do need to be thick-skinned to tolerate much of the discourse. Because Flashback allows all opinions, people with extreme opinions that are not tolerated in other forums may gravitate toward Flashback, creating an over-representation of such attitudes. Meanwhile, *Familjeliv*, as the second largest Swedish online forum, is a place for people who are looking to find and share tips and tricks on managing a family. In many ways, it is the opposite of Flashback, both in discussion topics and users. Here, most members appear to be women, often with children. In general, their level of education appears to be lower than Flashback users, and this may be reflected in what is discussed. On Flashback, topics range from the complex biology and politics to causal discussion on video games and relationships. On Flashback, members exhibit expertise about the most difficult topics and are willing to put their minds together to solve almost anything. Flashback members also exhibit a greater existential and philosophical awareness. Familjeliv posts tend to be more emotional and members show greater sympathy and support toward each other than member on Flashback. Most posts about loneliness in these forums are oriented around seeking advice on how to deal with loneliness in and out of work as well as sharing experiences of loneliness to show that no one is alone in being lonely. That said, posters are mostly those who have failed to escape loneliness and who have become trapped in persistent and chronic loneliness. As Weiss (1973) argues, those who have successfully dealt with their loneliness seem to be elsewhere, not thinking about loneliness at all. This is to be expected, but it creates a bias in the empirical material toward the more severe cases of loneliness. Lastly, Reddit is the world's largest forum with thousands of subforums. On Reddit, virtually everything is discussed, including loneliness at work. Because of the scale of Reddit, it is difficult note any specific culture, although Reddit does have a "karma" system, which rewards individuals for being helpful and friendly. Hence, Reddit users may be more inclined to manage their appearance and self-moderate, as opposed to Flashback users who seem to be less filtered and more outspoken.

[99] The nature of this thread was supportive: lonely people shared their stories to show that others are not alone with their feelings of loneliness. Some posters also called out to find people in their vicinity who wanted to meet up. Not all posters were necessarily lonely, some only chimed in to share tips and tricks on how to escape loneliness. Many posts were about missing a romantic partner, friendship, and family, but a few posts also dealt with loneliness at work. Social anxiety, depression, and self-hate characterized many posts. While skepticism toward society and hate toward women exists in this thread, it did not dominate. All in all, most contributions in this thread were constructive and friendly. The post was created in 2006, and ~90% of all posts were made between 2006 and 2016 as of 2022.

This tactic generated more than 40 posts on the topic. As a selection process was necessary, I chose posts based on their relevance to loneliness at work. A few posts were also selected based on their descriptive quality, despite having a weaker link to workplace loneliness. This effort yielded about 100 posts that were extracted, categorized, and interpreted. Although not all these posts explicitly include the word *ensamhet* (loneliness), all the posts originated from online conversations on (workplace) loneliness. As a part of the netnographic project, I also considered an online interview with the former CEO of the Swedish Migration Agency who had dealt with the loneliness of being an executive manager.

Netnography is a qualitative research approach that emerged around the time the internet entered people's lives (Kozinets, 1998). The term derives from (inter)net and ethnography and has been refined by business scholars who sought to understand consumers' attitudes toward brands and products (Kozinets, 2001). Netnography includes studying text messages, images, and videos (ibid). Netnography differs from other digital methods, such as big data and data mining, which tend to be software-driven heuristic exercises (Kozinets, 2015b, Kozinets & Gambetti, 2021). Instead, netnography, like ethnography, emphasizes hermeneutic interpretation where assimilative participation is central (Kozinets, 2010). However, what is meant by participation is up for debate. Sometimes, the netnographer takes a participatory role and assimilates into the online culture by co-creating content (i.e., posting) (Kozinets, 2015b). Other times, the netnographer assumes a more passive observational role (i.e., lurking). The passive approach may be considered more naturalistic than traditional ethnography, as it implies that a researcher observes a culture with minimal influence and disturbance on the community in action (ibid). No netnographer neglects the subjective role in interpretation, and even the passive approach demands the researcher's full participation in adopting the culture and gaining a deeper understanding of the behaviors, discourses, and symbols therein (Kozinets, 2015b; Kozinets & Gambetti, 2021). Kozinets (2015b) argues that netnography can effectively be "used to reveal discourse about hidden and stigmatic behaviours that may be more difficult to study in person, giving it a voyeuristic quality." Considering the nature of loneliness, this makes netnography a handy method for me.

Although netnography initially emerged as an approach to studying online culture (Kozinets, 2015a; 2015b), a meta-analysis found that most self-proclaimed netnographic projects do not study a single community but observe a range of online communities for a narrower purpose linked to the research question (see Bengry-Howell et al., 2011). In other words, rather than studying culture, netnographic projects tend to deal with how a subject appears (is discussed) online (ibid; see also

Tackett-Gibson, 2008).[100] This approach is arguably a departure from traditional ethnography. The same meta-analysis echoed Kozinets's (2015a) sentiment that netnography is often used to gain insights into people's private lives, including their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, which are often stigmatized in the real world (Bengry-Howell et al., 2011; Kozinets, 2015a). Netnography's capacity to gain access to this world should be regarded as its main strength. Another benefit of this method is the ease of access and the automatic archiving of data (Kozinets, 2010) as the researcher can access almost anything on the web from the comfort of her home and most content posted to social media stays there for the foreseeable future. Both ease of access and the automatic archiving of data significantly speed up the researcher's work and therefore reduce the cost of research.

Of course, netnography does come with caveats. First, there are some concerns about how reliable netnographic material is, as individuals online may be dishonest or intentionally misrepresent themselves or an object (Kozinets, 1998). The actively participating researcher may also find difficulties gaining trust and rapport (ibid). Additionally, due to the accessibility of the internet, it is easy to do poor netnography; good netnography takes time (ibid). It has been argued that any fieldworker needs to spend at least a year in the field to understand a community (see Van Maanen, 1988: 36). However, less time is required when a specific phenomenon is studied rather than culture. Addressing the concern regarding potential dishonesty and misrepresentation, Kozinets (2015b) argues that while people's online personas may not represent their real-life personas, this does not necessarily mean that they are false. Instead, online personas may reveal more of people's "complex dimensional inner truth" (ibid). From this perspective, online personas, regardless of their nature, may be seen as alternative truths and remain relevant to research despite their ambiguous relationship with the real world.[101] As people always post online with some intent, this arguably provides pragmatic validity to the material (see Sandberg, 2005).

Finally, there is a significant ethical dilemma of netnography: consent. People may not give their permission to participate or even be aware that they are being studied.

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[100] An example of this is Tackett-Gibson's (2008) study of online communities centered on drug use. Her research question is as follows: "How do people talk about their recreational use of very dangerous drugs such as ketamine [. . .] in online forums?" (in Kozinets, 2015a). In Tackett-Gibson's study, community participants were treated as experts on drug use and provided unique competence on the experience and meaning of drugs in people's lives.

[101] A critique of netnography is that it appears to assume that online communities are homogenous and harmonious. But from my anecdotal experience, online communities appear inherently conflictual: there exist subcultures within communities that struggle with each other. Online communities are also not as liberated as they might be perceived. Most online forums have moderators who remove comments that contain opinions or information that they do not agree with (for personal, political, or formal reasons).

This also makes it challenging to establish communicative validity (see Sandberg, 2005). The consensus here is that if the researcher is actively participating and co-creating content in online communities, this should be announced to the other members, but if the researcher is assuming a passive voyeur role, this does not need to be disclosed (Kozinets, 2015b). This is arguably an ethical gray zone, but the insight from studying online behavior without interference from the researcher is invaluable to understanding people's behaviors and attitudes and therefore arguably a "necessary evil." On the other hand, it may be argued that the passivist netnographic role is the most ethical approach a researcher can take, as it has minimal impact on the research participant. However, then the researcher also must make sure that the individual cannot be identified in the study by either herself or others. I address this by not including any names or aliases and translating all material from Swedish to English, making it difficult to trace.

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The selection of methods outlined here is aligned with my metatheoretical commitments. To reiterate, ontologically, I lean toward a constructivist nature of reality and a narrativist nature of experience (see Patterson & Williams, 1998). On an epistemological level, I recognize that the researcher is not separated from the phenomenon and that the research process is a nonlinear and hermeneutic activity. Finally, my axiological sympathies are aligned with interpretivism and anti-foundationalism (see Patterson & Williams, 1998). This research philosophy paves the way for a broad empirical approach. This approach produces a general understanding of how loneliness in organizations is experienced and coped with on an individual level. A risk of this approach is that loneliness may be conflated with analogous emotional and existential phenomena. In other words, one person's experience and description of loneliness could be diametrically different from another person's experience and description of loneliness, both in origin and expression. This may be the case, and it is arguably impossible to say where one experience ends and another begins. Therefore, some arbitrariness about loneliness must be tolerated in the empirical material. For another kind of study, this conceptual relativism could be problematic. However, since my aim with this thesis is not to measure or predict loneliness but to capture how people experience, rationalize, and cope with what they call loneliness in the workplace, it is not necessary and perhaps even impossible to establish a strict phenomenological ground. Every description of loneliness in the empirical material will signify what loneliness means for one individual. While some reports may be more generalizable than others, they all say something about what role loneliness potentially plays in organizations.

All Swedish material is translated into English, and I have included translation notes where necessary. To help navigate the empirical material, the source (forum name)

of a quotation or a case will be specified. The empirical materials are labeled and identified in the following table:

Method	**Participants/Source**	**Keycode**
Narrative Interviews	10	IP1-10
Narrative Survey	5	SU1-5
Semi-structured Survey	30	SS1-30
Netnography	Flashback	NF
Netnography	Familjeliv	NL
Netnography	Reddit	NR
Netnography	Other	NO

Approach to Data Analysis

As my empirical study progressed and demanded multiple phases, I took the opportunity to read anything that could provide me with theoretical insights into loneliness. Initially, I did not have a structured plan for this; I just read whatever came into my purview and seemed relevant. This included existentialism (e.g., Sartre, Buber, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche), political theory (e.g., Slater, Riesman, and Arendt), German and French sociology (e.g., Weber, Tönnies, and Durkheim), aesthetic philosophy (e.g., Kant and Schiller), and fiction (e.g., Murakami). I also engaged widely in philosophical anarchism and tried to wrap my head around Marxism, which led me to the Frankfurt School (e.g., Adorno and Honneth). Honestly, the selection of literature was quite random, and I do not pretend to understand the deeper philosophical implications of all these movements. However, I found this literature useful as I progressively interpreted the empirical material. In line with my wandering literature review, my approach to analysis is perhaps best understood as abductive reasoning – i.e., I moved back and forth between the empirical material and theory throughout the study (see Patton, 2015: 561).

While inductive analysis remains the most popular approach in qualitative research (see Patton, 2015:562); it has been argued that research naturally follows an abductive path when the researcher discovers a puzzling fact that existing theories fail to explain, which sends her on a journey to find the most sensible explanation(s) among many alternatives (Bryman & Bell, 2015: 27). Therefore, the abductive approach has been compared with detective work (see Wells & Sanders, 1975) and aligns well with the interpretive paradigm. This has also been described as an iterative or recursive approach to analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), and it has been argued that this method of analysis is particularly effective when interpreting empirical phenomena (ibid). From another angle, the abductive

approach involves generating knowledge both inductively from data and deductively from theory (Denzin, 1978:110; Levin-Rozalis, 2000; in Patton, 2015). A strength of the abductive research process is that I, as the researcher, can incorporate my learnings into the project and continuously adapt my approach as the problem and context become clearer. In practice, this means that some elements of the discussion and conclusion might be produced before the literature and methodology reviews have been completed (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), much like an artist sketching a whole painting before adding the details. Given the abductive and iterative approach, it is equally important for the researcher to not hold onto previously made assumptions and conclusions if these become obsolete. In other words, the abductive research process may lead to an excessive amount of work, since previous efforts often must be discarded to give room for more educated theories, methods, and explanations. In short, in abductive research, the target is moving; and an iterative approach can be very effective at hitting a moving target.

Although my process has admittedly been erratic, I see this as a strength of my research: the iterative approach has helped me make sense of a complex and multilayered phenomenon. On this note, the empirical material, at first glance, appears inherently conflictual. Initially, I did not know how to interpret this, but as my research journey continued, I began to see the same competing trends in the literature. I found this fascinating, and it encouraged me to deliberately search for conflicting narratives in both the empirical and theoretical material. Through this, I identified patterns and outlined categories for the empirical analysis as well as advanced my theoretical framework (Chapter 3).[102] I began by identifying where the material seemed self-conflictual. For example, I noted that some people described loneliness as a feeling of being abandoned by others, but others described it as a state of self-abandonment. Similarly, people explained that loneliness made them want to pursue both social proximity and separation (as independence). Perhaps most interestingly, people clearly evaluated loneliness differently: while many saw loneliness as a negative experience, some also associated it with individual strength and freedom. This process helped me construct the social and individualist perspectives in my theoretical framework, but I felt that presenting the empirical material along these dimensions made it appear too polarized, which did not reflect people's described experiences. Instead, my research participants' narratives seemed to capture a process that gradually transformed the phenomenon and the individual.

[102] Early in my research process, I categorized my theoretical material based on disciplines (e.g., "loneliness in psychology" as separate from "loneliness in philosophy"). But after a few iterations, I realized that there was little harmony among thinkers of a particular discipline, and I instead noted patterns that spun disciplines. Consequently, I chose to slice the theoretical material based on ideas instead.

To address this, I relied on the constructivist perspective on emotions, which suggests that emotional phenomena consist of a range of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. According to the constructivist approach, just as a phenomenon is constructed from various elements and activities, the same phenomenon may be "dissolved" into these components. Here, deconstruction is a common analytical approach in constructivist research (see Patton: 2015: 126), which, in simple terms, means to look for the underlying meaning(s) of a text within the text itself as opposed to searching for a "true essence" that is independent of appearance (i.e., Platonism) (see Lawlor, 2021). This method derives from Derrida's post-structuralist[103] writings (Derrida, 1981) and can be compared with Heidegger's (1962/2001) phenomenological *Destruktion.*[104] Similar to deconstruction, Heidegger championed the "destruction" of concepts into smaller pieces to understand them.[105] Although I do not explicitly deploy deconstruction or phenomenological destruction,[106] this approach resonates with my ambition to interpret workplace loneliness by dissecting people's descriptions of the experience. By looking at the empirical material through this lens, it became clear that many my research participants' narratives illustrate how loneliness moves from feelings and thoughts to coping practices. This realization helped me flesh out my research questions and the categories suitable for presenting my empirical findings. Having settled on this approach and reading the empirical material over and over (and iteratively as it expanded), I noted the following recurring themes in my research participants' descriptions:

- Experiences
    - Sadness and Shame
    - Dissimilar and Ostracized
    - Impostor Syndrome and Self-Contempt
    - Depression and Emptiness
- Coping Practices

[103] Derrida notably rejected the post-structuralist label, like most writers who are categorized as such (see Harrison, 2006).

[104] A common denominator between Derrida's and Heidegger's writings is a desire to challenge the Platonist hierarchy between essence and appearance (see Lawlor, 2021). Whereas Platonism celebrates essence above appearance, both Derrida and Heidegger (as well as existentialists such as Sartre (1946/2007: 20)), reverse this by arguing that appearance is the source of essence (Lawlor, 2021).

[105] In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1962/2001) makes the following observation: "If the question of Being is to have its own history made transparent, then this hardened tradition must be loosened up, and the concealments which it has brought about dissolved. We understand this task as one in which by taking the question of Being as our clue we are to destroy the traditional content of ancient ontology until we arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being–the ways which have guided us ever since" (p .44).

[106] Applying Derridean deconstruction is arguably difficult, because Derrida defines deconstruction in serval ways (see Lawlor, 2021), which may also be considered a demonstration of Derrida's own method (i.e., iterating on the meaning of a concept)

- Reintegration and Conformity
- Withdrawal and Distraction
- Repulsion and Peer Contempt
- Reconstruction and Pride

These categories capture workplace loneliness as a multifaceted experience, which is how it has appeared to me in both the theoretical and empirical material.[107] It is worth noting that the empirical material is not evenly distributed across these categories, and some categories may not be distinctly separated. As I wanted to maintain a bit of context when presenting the data, there is an inevitable conceptual overlap (or slippage) across the chapter. I have also treated all data sources equally, including interviews, surveys, and the netnographic study. This approach is accepted by the interpretivist and narrativist research community if the researcher does not generalize the data into pre-established rules (see Charmaz, 1995, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; in Shkedi, 2004: 92). But before breaking up and categorizing the empirical material into themes, I also wanted to celebrate the narrative quality of many of the submissions. Therefore, I have included a section with a selection of vignettes that provide a more coherent picture of how individuals experience and cope with workplace loneliness. The goal of this narrative analysis is to complement the otherwise fragmented thematic analysis and address the "conceptual slippage" by presenting exactly how one person constructs the phenomenon, including experience, thoughts, and coping practices. This approach has been promoted by organization scholars as beneficial for exploring empirical depth (see Costas & Fleming, 2009; Thomas & Davies, 2005), although is not always helpful toward reaching generalizable conclusions. In addition, I have included an autobiographical account of my relationship with (workplace) loneliness in the Appendix to offer more insight into how my personal experiences influence my research.

Moving forward, I recognize that there exist many coping theories, but I will not apply any of these in this thesis. This is an intentional decision I have made to avoid making the analysis more complicated and overly psychologizing (like my decision to not invoke phenomenology). Instead, I approach coping as the practices and tendencies people exhibit when dealing with (and responding to) experiences of workplace loneliness. These can be both intentional and unintentional, conscious and subconscious. This is in line with how others have approached loneliness and coping practices at work (e.g., see Dor-Haim, 2022). Although I recognize that some coping behaviors may be subconscious, it is not my intention to assume the role of a diagnostician. Rather, I aim to initially read my research participants' descriptions at face value, but this also means that the theoretical framework will

[107] That said, it should be noted that the empirical material is not evenly distributed across these categories, but it captures most of the spectrum.

play a lesser role in the analysis of how people experience and cope with workplace loneliness. However, following the review of the raw empirical material, I shift the analysis to address why people experience workplace loneliness. This is where the theoretical framework comes into play, and I will make a more interpreting reading of the empirical material. Through this, I arrive at three answers to the question why people experience workplace loneliness.

- Loneliness as a fear of being abandoned (the social perspective)
- Loneliness as the burden of being together (the individualist perspective)
- Loneliness as an unfulfilled desire for recognition (the recognition perspective)

These explanations, although derived from three distinct views, build on each other. As a part of this, a key contribution of this thesis will be to advance workplace loneliness conceptually, which lays the groundwork for having a meaningful discussion on the implications and role of loneliness in organizations.

While my focus on interpreting the experience of workplace loneliness aligns with phenomenological analysis, my goal of relating empirical findings to theoretical and conceptual contributions also finds resonance with Grounded Theory, particularly the constructivist variant (e.g., Charmaz, 2006, 2014; see also Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded Theory, in essence, is an iterative approach employing constant comparative analysis to generate new theories or concepts that are firmly grounded in the data itself as opposed to merely testing pre-existing theories. This process enables researchers to develop a profound understanding of the phenomenon under study by uncovering patterns and relationships within the data. However, my approach diverges from Grounded Theory in that I draw extensively from existing theories and concepts and have not adhered to the complete process associated with Grounded Theory, such as comprehensive researcher memos (see Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Thomas and James, 2006). Therefore, although there are evident similarities, I cannot claim to have wholeheartedly embraced Grounded Theory. As previously mentioned, my research process has been somewhat eclectic, incorporating elements of phenomenology, hermeneutics, narrative inquiry, and Grounded Theory to address my research problem. That said, one aspect that has remained stable throughout my research journey is my research aim. Therefore, it may be said that every twist and turn has ultimately guided me closer to achieving my intended objective.

Summary

In this chapter, I present an eclectic methodology for exploring the complex and multi-layered phenomenon of workplace loneliness. My research process incorporates elements of phenomenology, hermeneutics, narrative inquiry, and Grounded Theory, ultimately seeking to provide a rich and nuanced understanding of the experience and coping practices related to workplace loneliness. I follow an abductive and iterative approach in my research, resembling detective work, which allows for continuous adaptation as the problem and context become clearer. I also emphasize the importance of not holding onto previously held assumptions and conclusions if they become obsolete, recognizing the need for flexibility in an abductive research process. The empirical material for my study includes interviews, surveys, and a netnographic study, which are treated equally and analyzed using an interpretivist and narrativist lens. The goal of the empirical analysis is to uncover recurring themes related to how people experience and cope with workplace loneliness. Subsequently, I integrate the empirical material with the theoretical framework to identify three perspectives of why people experience loneliness in the workplace: loneliness as a fear of being abandoned (the social perspective); loneliness as the burden of being together (the individualist perspective); and loneliness as an unfulfilled desire for recognition (the recognition perspective). These perspectives build on one another, and I aim to advance workplace loneliness conceptually through their analysis. This completes the walkthrough of how I move from problem and theory to method, empirics, and analysis to address the research questions and aims. Next, I delve into the empirical material.

5. How People Experience and Cope with Workplace Loneliness

My literature review of loneliness research revealed a scarcity of inquiries into what loneliness is like and what it means to the individual who experiences it. This concern is echoed by leading loneliness scholars such as Wright and Silard (2021) and Firoz et al. (2020), who advocate for more qualitative research on the subject. In response to this call, two of my research questions focus on understanding how people experience and cope with workplace loneliness. In this chapter, I address these questions by presenting and analyzing my empirical data. The primary aspect of this work involves identifying themes and patterns in my research participants' narratives to better comprehend the various ways that people experience and cope with loneliness at work. Through this thematic analysis, I intend to uncover details and nuances that may have been overlooked in previous workplace loneliness research. Before delving into the thematic analysis, however, I examine four complete narratives from my research participants to demonstrate the diverse ways that people perceive and describe workplace loneliness. Ultimately, this chapter will lay the foundation for the subsequent analysis of why individuals feel lonely at work and initiate a discussion on the potential role of loneliness within organizations.

Vignettes

Although most scholars agree that loneliness is a complex and subjective experience, the phenomenon often falls victim to oversimplification because of many scholars' desire to address narrow research questions and produce generalizable results (Sønderby, 2013; Bound-Alberti, 2019). My qualitative approach addresses this issue to some extent; however, there is still a serious risk of misrepresenting the phenomenon. This is especially true for my thematic analysis and theoretical aspirations, where I gradually move from the individual level to the organizational level. Considering the rich accounts of workplace loneliness that my research participants have shared with me, neglecting the value of this narrative material would arguably be a loss. Therefore, I include a few of my research participant's stories in a largely complete and unfiltered. With this narrative presentation, the focus is not to get to the bottom of what really happened but to understand how individuals retrospectively construct a situation or sensation that they have lived through. Narratives, therefore, provide a synthesized experience that allows us to extend our empathy. In my case, narratives can also counteract stigma by illustrating that most people who experience workplace loneliness are otherwise "ordinary" people. They are parents, partners, friends, and colleagues,

not outcasts or hermits whose experiences may seem alien. By sharing these narratives, I also hope to show that we all have experienced what these people call "loneliness" even though we may categorize and construct the experience without referring to "loneliness" per se.

In this section, I present four narratives varying in length and content using the participants' own words. I translated these narratives from Swedish into English and added punctuation to improve clarity. In some of the longer interviews, I have had to trim the text to keep the narrative on point (marked with [. . .]). In this section, I do not invoke the theoretical framework as I aim to let the narratives speak for themselves. The first narrative centers on a young person's struggles with finding her place at work. Her story is one of the lengthier submissions, but it captures the many pains and paradoxes of workplace loneliness and is an excellent introduction to the rest of the empirical material. This case is titled "Contrastless" – a word the participant uses to describe her lonely self. The second narrative is from a person whose organizational role has made her a relative outsider to the workgroup. Consequently, she constructs workplace loneliness as inseparable from professional isolation. The third and fourth cases, although shorter, offer valuable insights into some inevitable aspects of organizational life that may be linked with loneliness, such as formality, asymmetrical relationships, and employee turnover.

#1: "Contrastless"

The following vignette has been selected because of its narrative quality and experiential detail and is part of a longer interview (IP2). Among other things, the participant describes workplace loneliness as a feeling of emptiness – a void that extinguishes the joy in the world as well as in her work. This story also demonstrates how difficult it can be to break out of a negative loop of loneliness at work. Moreover, this research participant echoes that we become who we are through the eyes of others and learn things about ourselves as we interact with people around us. This suggests that missing out on positive social interactions and recognition may leave a person without a solid sense of identity and personality. Ultimately, the participant points out that loneliness may manifest as self-doubt and social anxiety, which are both common themes in the rest of the empirical material.

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I had just finished my studies and needed to find a job. I worked for a short while as a research assistant [. . .] then a friend from the university told me that many people with my degree had applied to the same workplace, and that it was easy to get a job there. So, when they had an open position, I applied [. . .] and got it.

Most people who [work here] started together but I started alone and it feels like I ended up a bit on the outside from the get-go. In part, because I am not very social and also because I didn't feel very invited. In the beginning, people would ask a

few things, like where have you studied and such, but it feels like that quickly waned. The atmosphere at work was pleasant and everyone was kind of nice, but [as time passed] I noticed that I had difficulties getting a response [from others]. I noticed that I felt socially insecure and developed poor confidence and started to wonder why. Then I noticed things like I could sit by the lunch table, and no one even said hi or looked at me. As if you sit down like an invisible observer, things like that. Or that things you say "fall flat," and everyone is silent.

I don't know why it was like that. I think in part because I can be pretty distant, uninviting without being aware of it. In that way, I don't [seek] relationships with others. But I have also noticed that it is much easier for me to socialize with people hired after me, both through [meaningful] conversations and chit-chat. It feels like, because they were new and more open to socialization with everyone, it was easier to talk to them, than with those who have worked here longer and are more settled in the social [sphere] at work. In other words, maybe [the "veterans" are] less interested or open to new people.

I have also wondered if there is an explanation in that I have a different socioeconomic background than most [of my colleagues]. Since everyone [here] has a university degree they often also come from middle-class and up, which I notice quite often. When it's time for vacations, they talk about nothing but traveling to summer cottages, either their parents' or their own, which is completely foreign to my childhood. Or skiing vacations, or vacations paid for by their parents, and so on [. . .] Or that they talk about things that everyone has experienced, but for me didn't exist because my parents couldn't afford it. Like a colleague expressed, that as a kid he had a period where he tried many different sports and [our] colleagues chimed in, but my family could never afford that. Even if that is not something that makes me sad it feels a bit like a wall between me and my colleagues. I wonder sometimes if that contributes to me not recognizing certain social rules and signals, that I haven't socialized the same way during my childhood, but it's hard to say. But I have noticed all my life that I struggle in "middle-class environments" like university. [. . .] Sometimes it feels like there is not a single person who grew up with poor parents in my workplace.

During spring 2018, it was the worst. In March, many colleagues who started after me left [the company], [and] those [were the ones] that I had an easier time getting along with. Remaining were colleagues that I didn't click with . . . it was something that I thought about every day, that I barely spoke with my colleagues, that I didn't have the energy to go to fika [converse over coffee and pastries] or have lunch with them, and I felt ostracized. [. . .] I felt like no one shows interest or asks anything or gives recognition that I am actually there. I could not socialize naturally, I would always think about whether it was time for me to say something, if it was worth speaking, and how people would react, which mostly gave me anxiety and made

me tense and tired. When I stopped lunching with my colleagues [. . .] I noticed that I felt much better and wasn't as exhausted after work.

I remember a situation with a colleague, who was always nice and talkative. We were going to the fika-room [break/coffee room] and walked there together. But when we were about to sit down with the rest of our colleagues who were already there, instead of taking the open vacant seats on the end of the table like everyone does, she suddenly said, "I'll squeeze in here" and sat down in the middle among all colleagues in a sofa where there was barely any space and left me to sit alone at the end of the table. It was so obvious that she would rather make the effort and squeeze in [elsewhere] than sit with me. [. . .] It was clear that she chose fun colleagues over me. I experience similar situations often. [. . .] First, I thought I was imagining things but then I noticed it almost every day and it contributed a lot to my feeling of ostracization. I couldn't understand why, and I pondered on it a lot.

Another reason why I felt [severely lonely] during that time was that before New Year's I had received a great deal of criticism for my work (not unreasonable critique but a lot of it at the same time). We had a group of superior colleagues with the title "decision-makers" that you talk to daily about your tasks, and they have the best insight into your work and your performance. The decision-makers were given the assignment to evaluate all administrators [including me], to improve quality. To me, such an evaluation should include both positive and negative things, but in my case, it was almost exclusively shortcomings that I received feedback on. Those who composed the critique (not personally, but through the manager) were the colleagues that I had worked with for months, who had been nice, whom I often asked for help and tended to, who had said nothing negative before about my work. So, I felt very let down in some way, that people, who had been one way [appreciative] toward me in the day-to-day work thought many negative things about my work.

Even if the critique was about my work, I started having very bad social self-confidence because of this, and I started feeling that everyone around me was thinking negative things about me without showing it [. . .] So, my loneliness at work is probably rooted in two things, first that general feeling of not fitting in and second because I was devastated when I received criticism that hurt my self-confidence. Finally, when the colleagues that I liked left in March, things took a turn for the worse because I had nothing positive there was nothing that countered the negative feelings, and I experienced loneliness.

[When I feel lonely] it is like a sad feeling that sinks downwards in my body that I am trying to ignore. After the situations [that made me lonely] a sorrow lingers, but that slowly also grows and germinates, so that you have more negative thoughts that remain even when the actual sadness is gone. When I received the critique about my work, I felt completely devastated and it took away all joy about my work.

I left work early and cried on the way home and have cried many times since then [. . .] It gave me intense anxiety to talk to the decision-makers because I felt like they thought I was completely incompetent. And I felt ashamed because apparently, I am terrible at my job, and I had [been wrong about thinking we had] a good collaboration/that they liked me.

No praise I have received since then, I have been able to accept [. . .] [I] just felt empty and sad because I don't dare to believe in the praise, not even when it comes from my boss. It's been almost a year now, but I still have anxiety about talking to the decision-makers, even if it's not the same decision-makers who criticized my work. When I came back from vacation this year and was expected to talk to the decision-makers, I was tense for hours and I realized how messed up it was, and how much it had affected me. So, I avoid as much as possible to talk to decision-makers still, even though I'm supposed to do it multiple times a week. [. . .] This has made me more independent in my work but has not made me feel well, and I have been lonelier.

When my colleagues didn't sit next to me, I felt sadness, like there is a large gap between me and others, and I feel empty inside. Especially in the situation with the colleague who I walked with, and I thought we were having a good time and would continue to fika together but then she [abandoned me]. That hurt and I felt ashamed about thinking anything [positive] about myself. After that, I thought poorly of her and thought she was fake and irritating, and I was irritated by the fact that others liked her.

After the criticism from the decision-makers, I talked to my team leader, but I never explained how sad it had made me, we just talked about how I didn't understand all the feedback (some were quite fuzzy) and I wanted clarity to be able to develop. Just that was hard enough, and I had taken anti-anxiety/sedative medicine before to gather the strength to talk about it at all without crying. I wrote an email to my boss [the person who had compiled and delivered the critique] also, but I never sent it. [. . .] I wish I had told my boss or team leader that it did not feel okay how the critique was presented, that it made me sad, and that it was unreasonable to only come with negative feedback. [. . .] But I didn't want to cry at work, so I let it be.

[Loneliness] at work [for me] is that I do not have a social group, people in my surrounding who I feel a kind of security with, like not having people I can go and ask if they want to grab a bite or fika. [. . .] Or that you feel that others "find" one another and click, but that you never do that. [When I am lonely], it is like I am nobody. I feel empty and without personality because I have no one to see my own reflection in and interact with. That's probably the worst, that you get sad is one thing, but feeling that you do not have a personality is worse, you become like completely "contrastless" [*kontrastlös*]. And then you know it hasn't always been like this, but you don't understand what has happened or how you are going to get

your personality back, because nothing you do really produces a response in the people around you anyway.

[Loneliness] makes me feel worse and enjoy work less [. . .] I went from really looking forward to workdays, and feeling enthusiastic about my work and even colleagues, to not feeling anything except maybe anxiety and uneasiness. It became difficult for me to get up in the morning. I thought I was boring, a bad person, and worthless at my job, with no one to talk to. I had general negative thoughts about myself [. . .] then this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, because I become more boring, more down, less happy, talkative, and nice. Because it's pointless to be talkative and nice to colleagues who barely respond to what you say. You lose the will to put in the effort because nothing helps.

The fear of loneliness makes me eat lunch later because I am afraid there won't be a place among my colleagues and I will have to sit alone. It is also possible I have avoided taking breaks because I have not felt invited to join fika with my colleagues. Not because they have explicitly expressed it [. . .] but all the small things. It also makes me avoid asking for help that [might] irritate them. It's like a social buffer I am missing, that makes me unable to deal with setbacks, when I feel lonely. When I feel secure with my colleagues [and not lonely] things are easy I am like another person socially, happier, [I] can give more of myself, conversations come much easier without worrying about what to say.

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This participant's description of workplace loneliness is vivid and evokes empathy. As I read her recollections, I imagine myself walking through the lunchroom, looking for a pair of friendly eyes that pull me in. But no one looks, waves, or calls my name, so I sit down at the edge of a table with strangers. It is a painful feeling, not feeling seen or wanted. Moreover, this story offers an account of social alienation in its literal sense: she perceives herself as an outsider because of her different socioeconomic background. This reminds me that even if people appear homogenous on a superficial level, every person has a unique history that influences her experiences. In the case of this research participant, her cultural dissimilarities made it difficult for her to break into the group naturally, which left her feeling ostracized. This potentially makes her more conscious and sensitive to events and situations in the social environment. She struggles but appears to cope with the situation by putting effort into her work. Initially, she conveys a strong work identity and holds her own performance in high regard, but this confidence is demolished when she receives criticism from her peers. Suddenly, she perceives herself as both socially alienated and of little value to the group.

A few colleagues were responsible for surveilling the workplace and reporting findings to their superiors. In this case, the manager compiled the feedback

anonymously before presenting it to the worker, protecting the "decision-makers" and enabling the manager to hide behind the anonymous feedback. Not knowing who provided the negative feedback raised her guard as she became suspicious of others. While this review approach may sound reasonable from a managerial perspective, it can be compared with secret informants in USSR and how secrecy bred loneliness (Svendsen, 2009; see Chapter 3 footnote). Like people in the Soviet Union, the participant withdrew not only from the social space but also from the organizational processes by avoiding decision-makers. This allowed her to escape the anxiety that was inherent in their asymmetrical relationship. But the feeling of loneliness and ostracization remained.

#2: Professionally Isolated

The following narrative is extracted from another interview (IP8). Like the previous case, it is complex. This participant expresses a desire for closeness yet still chooses to withdraw, feeling abandoned by others, and ultimately slowly abandons herself. She rationalizes that her loneliness stems from being professionally isolated from her peers, which, like the previous case, leaves her feeling insecure and ostracized. Her workplace loneliness appears persistent, which may potentially make her more vulnerable to intense moments of loneliness.

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I've been [at this workplace] for almost three years. I am a school curator. I am on the student health team. I have meetings with students, but I also support the teachers. I am alone in my profession. There is only one curator at the school. When I applied for the job, I wanted a part-time job since I was planning to also study part-time. The work assignment was somewhat unclear and most [colleagues] at the school had a vague understanding of what my role was at the school. This has given me the freedom to define my role, which I appreciate in many ways. But it has also resulted in me having to work extra to find my role in the group. For example, to establish a relationship with the teachers and come to terms with them on how we are to collaborate. There have been no guidelines for me to use. [. . .] It has also been difficult to make the teachers understand what my role is and what the difference is between me and for example the school psychologist. There is some overlap in our roles, and this can get messy.

I am still quite free to control the content of my work, but I also experience that it is difficult for me to manage larger projects since I am only part-time at the school as a curator, I sometimes feel like I am someone who is there just because I have to be there, but that I am really quite alone with my perspective. [. . .] Therefore, it sometimes feels difficult to engage enough other people in a project to be able to pursue it in a satisfactory way. The teachers mostly want to teach and when there is a problem someone should preferably just appear and solve it swiftly and conveniently (like a car is handed over to the mechanic, kind of).

[My loneliness] stems from professional isolation and a unique role at the workplace. That I am only there part-time also contributes. But I also feel left out on a personal level. I often feel that me and my colleagues are not interested in the same things. I have tried to start conversations on different levels, both around work and more personal things, but it is like it just says stop. [. . .] Generally, it feels like people are not so interested. They already have established groups/relationships and they seem to want to maintain the structure that exists. Or it is I who doesn't fit into that structure. And I cannot really say what it is about. Maybe we just function differently. I don't really think anyone thinks badly of me. On a superficial level, we have decent interactions. That said, I do get the feeling that some think that I don't really fit in or have an idea of me that I don't recognize and have (obviously) not been able to prove otherwise.

[A particular situation that made her feel lonely] was last Christmas dinner [with the school staff]. [. . .] I sat by a table with a few teachers around my age. The school psychologist was also there. [During the evening] the school psychologist learned that the PE teacher had taken a CBT [Cognitive Behavior Therapy] course, which the psychologist (who also had a CBT approach) thought was very positive. "Are you also a CBTer!?" That's great!". They had a long conversation about different parts of CBT, exposure, how to relate to feelings/thoughts etc.. I also have a therapist education in both CBT and affect-focused therapy (which has a psychodynamic background) but for some reason, I didn't manage to break into the conversation.

The teacher and the psychologist conversed while I was listening. Suddenly the psychologist says that the best part of CBT is that it focuses on behavior and not something "silly." When he says this, he makes a pause and looks at me. Then he talks about a "ridiculous" claim that some psychodynamic therapist made a long time ago and wants to know what I think about this. I answer that [. . .] the psychodynamist's claim sounds strange but that we at the same time should be humble toward what we don't know. Knowledge changes and in the future maybe we will realize a connection that we don't recognize today. [I tell him] that we still know very little about how the human brain works [and] therefore we should be careful with rejecting seemingly irrational ideas. Because there might be a strand of truth in them. The psychologist is skeptical of my reasoning and suggests that I am opening up to methods that are not based on evidence/science. I try to explain that that's not what I mean, that in treatment we should of course use the knowledge we have today, but that we also should be open to new ideas in our quest for new knowledge. I still don't manage to reach him, and it feels very frustrating. The PE teacher says something along the lines "Now things got too deep for me" and the school psychologist seems to be annoyed with me. [. . .] After that the atmosphere [at the Christmas dinner table] was awkward.

While it was happening, I felt quite astonished to find myself in this situation. I didn't think the school psychologist thought I was as strange as he now indicated. It was also frustrating to not be able to explain what I meant and that I instead was rejected as some sort of "ridiculous" person who encouraged doubtful methods in psychotherapy. It made me sad that they looked at me that way and I wondered why they had that idea. After the event, I felt cut off somehow. I tried to talk about more easygoing things during the rest of the evening, chime in on their conversations and laugh at their jokes. But all the time I had this feeling that I didn't belong and that I wasn't wanted there. I felt that their confidence in me was low. I also felt that I wasn't respected, and I felt misunderstood. I was sad and disappointed. [. . .] I also felt a bit stupid/ridiculed because they were so incredibly skeptical/non-understanding of what I had said earlier that evening. I wondered if it was I who had the wrong mindset.

I felt ostracized and left [early] and thought I would never do that again. I wrote an email to my ex-husband and told him about what had happened. I wanted to talk to him because he is a wise person who I trust. I think that by talking to him, I wanted to ground myself [find confidence] again. [. . .] We had a good conversation, and it felt a little better afterward. [Still] I think [social work gatherings] is not my thing and I won't attend more of those. I also felt that I do not think we [the school psychologist and I] will be able to collaborate at the level I was hoping for. We have too different perspectives of things and they [he] don't have the confidence in me. I think that I will have to switch jobs and until then I will have to keep a distance from my colleagues. [. . .] I regret going to the Christmas dinner. [. . .] I haven't met the school psychologist since then. But the PE teacher seemed to be regretful the next time we met, and she asked if she had been unkind to me.

Loneliness to me is not feeling a connection with others. To feel that thing keeping us together is so shallow and ephemeral that it almost doesn't exist. When I am lonely, I begin to think if there is something wrong with me. I think that people in my surroundings like me on a superficial level. But there is something that makes me unable to reach my colleagues the way that I wish. [Loneliness also] makes me sad and I have the tendency to put blame on myself. To feel that I am wrong or inadequate. I also have a tendency to overanalyze things.

***

Like the first vignette, this narrative is moving, perhaps because it represents an everyday and seemingly unavoidable experience for many people, especially in part-time and temporary work situations. For this participant, being a part-timer combined with her complicated work relationship with the school psychologist led to feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and regret, which manifested as a desire to withdraw while still wanting to establish a connection with her colleagues. This person associates all these paradoxical feelings with loneliness in the workplace. I

find this fascinating, and it is something I intend to delve deeper into in a moment. But first, I want to share two shorter narratives that have been collected via the surveys.

#3: Like a Piece of Furniture

The following story was submitted via the narrative survey form (SU4) and is an excellent example of where a person might not have been comfortable participating in an interview but was able to share her story anonymously. This is a heartbreaking story, and I am grateful to be able to include it in my research.

***

I've been about to submit this [survey] form many times, but [I] hesitated. In part, because it's difficult to put words to my feelings but also because I'm not sure if it's "real" loneliness I feel. At the same time, I don't what else it would be. I am a pretty lonely person in my private life also. I have almost no friends and I have been single for five years now. I have accepted that I probably won't have children on my own, but I don't want to be alone my whole life. I think these feelings can spill over at work even if work is also lonely. I have been at the same place for a long time now, about 15 years. Still, I feel almost completely invisible. I have an assignment that is pretty isolated, so I don't really belong to a team, even if I belong to the "administrative team" on paper.

We have an open floor plan, and I am in the middle of everything. We rotate once every other year, but it doesn't matter, still, no one talks to me, and I don't talk to anyone. We have a culture here where we respect calm and quiet, so it's not encouraged to talk with people on the floor. At least that's how I experience it. In addition, I have some social anxiety, so I rarely talk to people on my own initiative. Not a lot of people have worked here as long as I have, and the new [colleagues] might see me as boring. This is not a place where you want to be too long, because you turn grey. You get stuck. At the same time, I don't think others have a lot of social exchange in the office. Maybe this is Maybe that's why others avoid me, I have like become one with the office, like a piece of furniture.

[. . .] A few years ago, a new male colleague started. I found him very attractive, and out of random we started exchanging words in the lunch area, reception etc. I thought it approached me in a way that he was not to others. During this time, it was fun to go to work. I felt happy, and I think I worked harder also. But I don't know what I thought: [Was] he was flirting with me? So, I guess I was flirty back, which he didn't seem to have anything against. But then another colleague saw us, and approached me afterwards and said, you know he has a wife and kids, right? Then I felt stupid and very lonely. I didn't know if I had misinterpreted him, or if he was playing, or being "unfaithful", either way I didn't want to go along with it.

Or maybe I wanted, because it felt good while it lasted, but at the same time I know better.

Another situation that made me feel stupid and lonely was when I had development talks with my closest boss. She is a bit younger than me and has not been here as long. She is a very appreciative boss, and gives a lot of credit and attention, to everyone but me. I'm not assigned tasks, and sometimes sit without anything to do. I brought this up in a development talk, and then she [the boss] told me that she didn't give me time or attention because I'm so good at managing myself. She called me a cowboy who doesn't need surveillance, carrot, or stick. In the meeting, it made me feel proud, but at the same time I would much rather be seen as a team player, but I feel that I'm not given the opportunity, because everyone sees me as a "cowboy" who tends to herself [*sig själv*, which is a gender-neutral construction]. At the same time, I doubt myself a lot, because no one really knows what I do in the office, they just assume that it is something important because I have done it for so long.

During episodes where I have no task, I feel so worthless and bored, and lonely, [especially] when I see that others have tasks that are clearly linked to our [team/organization] mission and are appreciated by the boss. Sometimes this makes me seek out colleagues and offer to help out, but then they say no and I feel like a bother. I don't know how to get out of this, this loneliness. I think I need to switch jobs, but that feels super scary, because I don't know what qualities I have that would be valuable in another workplace. Maybe I should study at the university, but I also don't want to be the only one who is 30+ [years], and so by a lot. My dream is to work in a small team, with something more creative, and feel that we create something together. I think I have a lot to give, but right now I just feel so grey and boring. [. . .]

***

When I read this vignette, I feel this person's pain as if it were my own even though I have never been in a situation like this. But that is arguably only an illusion; in reality, I cannot begin to understand the depth of this person's experience without living it myself. What I do understand is that although there may be pride and freedom in autonomy, it can also bring pain, especially if it results in undesired independence and disconnection from others. Interestingly, this person paradoxically describes herself as stuck in the organization while feeling socially unanchored at the same time. From the outside, she might be perceived as loyal, but from her perspective, low self-esteem is keeping her from looking for something better. This person also echoes the experiential link between loneliness, emptiness, and boredom and that sometimes it may be difficult to say where one ends and another begins. She repeatedly describes her situation (and herself) as "grey" even though she appears to be only in her thirties. The manager in this scenario seems to

have good intentions, but since she is unaware of the participant's internal state, what is intended as praise is received as a curse. Of all the participants in my study, this person is also the only one to describe a situation that is perhaps best understood as emotional loneliness (i.e., unfulfilled desire or expectations for intimate relationships). This shows that while "emotional loneliness" may be rare in the workplace, it can happen.

Ultimately, this participant expresses a desire to work closely with her colleagues, but her professional isolation is so solidified that it has become impossible. It is an unfortunate situation, almost as if she is destined to be lonely in both her private and professional life. Simultaneously, she is and is not a victim; there does not appear to be any direction we can point a blaming finger. Perhaps there may be some underlying antecedents that a psychoanalyst could uncover, but that is beside the point of this thesis. What is important here is how this individual has chosen to describe her workplace loneliness, and she has done so in a way that effectively helps us empathize with her experience and sensemaking.

#4: Departure of a Friend

This last case was submitted via the narrative survey (SU2) and is shared precisely as it was collected (only translated). Although one of the shorter narratives, it clearly captures how loneliness can be related to the fear of abandonment in the workplace.

***

It was my first job after graduating. Because I didn't have any previous work experience, I was assigned a mentor. She was a woman, about 35 years old, more than 10 years older than me. We had daily contact and she was a big support for me. No one else in the company cared about me, so our relationship was very important to me. She became kind of a mother figure, or big sister, to me. I liked her a lot and she felt like a safe space in the company. If I felt lost or stressed, I could always go to her and talk about it. After 4–5 months, she tells our work group that she has resigned. I did not know about this before, and I remember feeling betrayed. Partly because she had not told me before she made it public, but also because I felt like she was about to abandon me. She knew I had difficulties fitting in at the company, and now she was leaving me alone with all these people who do not care about me. I did not show it, but I was angry and disappointed. To me, it was unfathomable that you would ever want to resign. I [thought] that when you start at a workplace, you stay there more or less until you retire. What was her reason to leave? Is the company not good enough for her? Am I not good enough? We never talked about it before she left. We barely spoke after she made her departure public. I do remember her expressing a strong discontent with the top management and implying that was why she left. At this point, I saw her as a traitor, and I didn't listen to what she had to say. I thought, "well, if that's how you feel,

maybe it's best that you leave." After she left, I felt sad for a while, but after a few weeks, I got over it.

I had a similar experience at the same workplace. After one year at the company, I still had not managed to establish a lot of relationships. I didn't really have any colleagues that I talked to, but I had found a friend in the receptionist. She was about my age, and we had similar interests, so whenever I had to get a leg stretcher, I would walk over to the reception and talk to her for a while. She was also very good at making me feel welcomed in the morning. I was always met with a large smile and a warm hello. She was the first and the last I saw of the workday, and it always gave a good start and a good end. She worked in the reception for a while, maybe two years, but then she wanted to study something and left the company. I do not judge her for that, I understand that you don't want to sit in a reception your whole life. But I felt such a terrible emptiness after she left. The new receptionist was skilled at administrative tasks, but she wasn't particularly nice. She didn't make me feel at home when I came to the office in the morning, nor did she make me feel missed when I left the office in the evening. I realized that I had lost a friend. It was painful. Since she left, I have not felt that familiar feeling at work. I have people I talk to daily, but there is no one that I have "connected" with in the office. I feel pretty lonely.

[Loneliness] for me, is about [not] feeling appreciation and being [un]wanted by others. I don't need to have a lot of friends or a large social network, but I need a couple of people that make me feel seen. The feeling that if I disappeared, someone would miss me. I can be around people, but if no one sees me, really sees me, I am not there.

***

This is a story I can relate to personally, and I imagine this participant to be a young man, not too different from myself ten years ago. From his description, his workplace loneliness seems to stem from losing meaningful relationships in the workplace. I have similarly fallen out of touch with old colleagues that used to be important in my life, and I have felt "betrayed" by people I thought had my back. In favor of my study, this person is transparent about his thoughts about this loss and shares details that some people would be hesitant to admit. I find it interesting that he developed antipathies toward his mentor after learning about her resignation. Maybe this is a kind of coping method: he protects himself from the pain of (imminent) abandonment by dismantling his attachment to her from the inside. Meanwhile, regarding the receptionist, he saw her as a friend, but he also seemed to recognize that being friendly was a part of her job. Although someone else might perceive her friendliness more cynically, he cherished it. At the same time, the fact that the second receptionist was not as friendly suggests that being social was not a requirement, but rather something the first receptionist chose to be (or authentically

was). Irrespective of its fabrication or genuineness, the emotion made at least one person in the office genuinely happy. On the other hand, it would have been interesting to hear the receptionist's side of the story and why she chose to leave.

This narrative also highlights that investing oneself emotionally in a relationship at work entails a risk, as collegial relationships are often bound to the organization. When people depart from the workplace, associated relationships are likely going to be suspended, as bridging the gap between the work sphere and private sphere is challenging and sometimes even inappropriate. That said, most relationships outside of organizations also depend on some fleeting condition, such as lifestyle or geographic location. The difference is that people often enter organizations only to stay temporarily. Therefore, investing in workplace relationships may seem unwise as we know they will eventually end.

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The four narratives presented in this chapter set the backdrop for the following thematic analysis of the empirical material. A visible pattern in the narratives above is that loneliness involves a degree of pessimistic meta-representation (i.e., you think others think badly of you). Another persistent theme is that if you have ended up on the outside of the work group, it can be extremely tough to reintegrate. A few research participants even implied that if you do not integrate with the group immediately, you may be doomed to be an outsider. Perhaps this is why loneliness is so painful: it pushes people toward a near impossible feat. Although I have intentionally not discussed theory in this chapter, it becomes evident how the theoretical framework can be applied to these narratives. In short, all the loneliness descriptions above involve an unfulfilled desire for recognition: a desire to be seen, heard, and appreciated. It is not only a desire to be recognized as an equal but also as a unique and valuable individual. In the following sections, I delve deeper into this and the different experiences and coping practices that my participants associated with workplace loneliness.

Experiences

Having considered the narrative quality of my empirical material, I now compile and categorize my participants' descriptions to identify the different ways that loneliness is experienced in the workplace, including feelings of sadness, shame, ostracization, self-contempt, and emptiness. Although my research participants often frame this as painful, they occasionally acknowledge loneliness as a deepening and humbling experience. In addition, a few individuals associate loneliness with feelings of strength, pride, and freedom. Considering this and that the Swedish language is ambiguous when it comes to distinguishing between aloneness, loneliness, and solitude, I need to be careful when translating the

material into English. For example, consider the following quotations from three participants:

> I often choose *ensamhet* [aloneness/solitude?] where it is calm and relaxing to be. Then I recharge energy and recover. The self-chosen *ensamhet* [solitude?] I appreciate, but when I am rejected or forgotten I can feel a sad kind of *ensamhet* [loneliness?]. (SS22)

> *Ensamhet* means different things. The first I think of is that I have a need for *ensamhet* [aloneness?] sometimes. I also think that *ensamhet* is existential, as something that is both good for me, but momentarily I suffer from, to feel *ensam* [lonely?]. *Ensamhet* can come in so many nuances and shifting meanings. (SS15)

> [*Ensamhet* is] a concept that is both a positive experience [solitude?] if it is chosen but otherwise is negative and associated with being an outsider [loneliness?]. (SS13)

These translations highlight why Swedish material on loneliness may be difficult to interpret and ultimately generalize into other contexts (i.e., cultures).[108] As noted, while the ambiguous accounts above are relevant to understanding the construction of *ensamhet*, they are not necessarily transferrable to the construction of "loneliness" as an experience. Therefore, I have filtered out descriptions where I think the participant is "confusing" (or conflating) loneliness with aloneness or solitude. This linguistic uncertainty might not be a unique situation to Swedish, but perhaps valid for many other languages that are unfamiliar to me. Either way, it is an epistemological issue that I take seriously, as I aim to keep aloneness and loneliness apart. That said, most research participants did understand this distinction, as can be seen in the following quotation:

> *Ensamhet* [loneliness] is for me negative. To be *själv* [alone] does not need to be negative but in the concept of *ensamhet* [loneliness], there is a feeling of something missing. *Ensamhet* is an experience of not feeling togetherness and closeness with others. (SS16)

From now on, I will not be using the Swedish word and when I translate *ensamhet* to loneliness, that means I interpret the participant's words as referring to a painful subjective experience that resonates with how I have conceptualized loneliness earlier in this thesis. To kick off the thematic analysis, I consider one of the more

[108] This is particularly true for the survey responses and netnographic material as I cannot ask the individual to clarify.

prominent patterns in the empirical material – i.e., describing loneliness as sadness and shame.

Sadness and Shame

Perhaps the most common depiction of workplace loneliness in my empirical material refers to it as a kind of sadness. However, this is not the regular kind of sadness expressed with a frowning face and tears: workplace loneliness appears to be an invisible and silent sadness, a sadness that one bears alone:

> The feeling is very heavy, it weighs me down. Like a kind of sadness that I don't show, but also an itch that is frustrating. (SU4)

Although there are phenomenological similarities between loneliness and sadness, they are arguably conceptually distinct. Whereas sadness is typically understood as a socially expressive emotion, loneliness seems to lack this dimension (Prinz, 2003; see also Appendix A.1. *What is an Emotion?*). For example, although the communicative purpose of sadness might be to attract help, loneliness might push the individual to help herself (Cacioppo, 2009; Cacioppo et al., 2014). In other words, sadness signals that the individual has been unjustifiably offended or harmed and deserves help, but a lonely person might not have the same claim to social aid. Rather, the social pain of loneliness may be perceived as justified. From this angle, loneliness appears as a kind of internalized sadness that becomes associated with shame. This could explain why loneliness is stigmatized and often kept undisclosed:

> I have never felt this kind of [loneliness] before at work and I think it is really unpleasant. I suspect my manager has actually noticed it because he took me aside today and asked carefully without really saying it out loud. Stupidly, I pretended like everything was fine [. . .] because I am ashamed? [. . .] It would be difficult to ever have a concrete discussion about this at work because there are so many small insignificant things that the only natural conclusion would be that I am totally oversensitive (which of course may be true). (NF)

In this case, the individual barely understands why he experiences loneliness. Since he cannot pinpoint the exact situation or event that causes this pain, he deems it foolish even to mention it to his manager. Instead, he keeps it hidden. It is possible that because loneliness is often associated with aloneness (especially in Swedish culture), those who experience loneliness in the company of others may feel confused or ashamed about their emotional state. Another research participant echoed this as a "sad and shameful experience":

> The voluntary aloneness I appreciate, but when I am disregarded or forgotten, I feel a sad loneliness, a kind of shameful feeling. (SS22)

This sadness is also touched upon by an online post and a survey participant:

> I no longer feel at home at work. I feel outside and that my colleagues don't really invite me. [. . .] everyone else talks to each other, but no one talks directly to me. [. . .] It's not like I'm bullied, but it feels like people are uncomfortable when I'm around. I don't know if it's true or if I imagine it. [. . .] This is difficult to talk to others about. I feel like a failure, but I don't want to appear touchy and make a scene by bringing up my feelings. At the same time this is a difficult situation for me. (NO)

> I can't really describe [loneliness], maybe that I feel small and unimportant, it is not a fun feeling. I have not told any of my colleagues, even though I think they would understand. (SU3)

In the latter case, the individual is not worried about being misunderstood, but the feelings of loneliness are kept secret. In this context, some people might hide their loneliness because they are afraid of how people in their vicinity will respond. Not only could peers see the lonely individual as a pitiful victim but also might feel attacked or offended themselves. In other words, another person's loneliness could be interpreted as blame or criticism – i.e., one's company is not good enough for the lonely person. If peers find this accusation unjustified, they might reject the lonely individual. Hence, the lonely person could compromise her own situation by revealing her emotional state. It may, therefore, be in the individual's best interest to sort out the case alone even if this may momentarily produce even greater feelings of sadness and shame.

Beyond the concealing of loneliness, one of the earlier quotations captures loneliness as an experience of being "small and unimportant." This is a recurring theme in the empirical material:

> I feel invisible and insignificant [. . .] my ideas and my opinions are not requested and no one "invites" me to the discussion. [. . .] I feel unappreciated [unrecognized] and completely worthless [. . .] the enthusiasm I once had for this job has disappeared. (SS24)

> [I feel] lost, very small like [I am] 5–6 years old, invisible. (IP7)

> I sit in an [open floor] office landscape but am invisible. (NL)

> Loneliness, for me, is not feeling seen or needed by others. (SS3)

> [Loneliness is] not being seen or heard. (SS11)

> Loneliness, for me, is about not being seen or understood. To be among people but not finding my place because the person I am is not recognized [by others]. (SS9)

Needless to say, none of these participants are invisible or physically smaller because of their situation, but their experience of this is real. Clearly, these people do not feel recognized as valuable members of the group. In Honneth's terms (1992), they are suffering from the absence of solidarity because their individual contribution goes unrecognized. When their qualities are neglected, loneliness emerges, perhaps as a warning signal for being in a socially precarious situation. But this situation is not necessarily statically defined as it also depends on the individual's expectations:

> Although I am not alone I feel alone/lonely. However, I have a knack for putting other people first and I am happy to help. [But I] have trouble finding someone who is willing to put the same effort in me. But I don't complain, at the same time I long for a deep friendship where I can confide how empty and lonely I feel. (NO)

This person perceives herself as a giver who is not receiving an equal amount of affection in return. As a result, she experiences neglect as she is more involved in others than they are in her. Here, there is an undertone of self-pity: she bears the pain alone, but she is also not letting anyone in. Perhaps she worries about what would happen if she revealed the full extent of her loneliness to another person.

Drawing on Fukuyama (1992), I believe all the research participants above capture loneliness as denied thumos (isothymia) – i.e., an unfulfilled desire to be recognized as an equal. As mentioned, this can lead to feelings of inferiority, insignificance, sadness, and shame. On this note, many participants recalled feeling empty:

> [Loneliness is] non-existing warmth! (SS11)

> [Loneliness is] silence. (IP3)

> [Loneliness is] consuming, colors disappear. Like window blinds being shut. (SS21)

Here, loneliness becomes associated with the void: the absence of sound, warmth, and light. Arguably, these are primitive fears. The connection between loneliness and darkness is not new. Freud (1917/1963: 407), for example, associated the fear

of isolation with the fear of darkness.[109] As for the frigidity of loneliness, a lonely patient of the psychoanalyst Frieda Fromm-Reichmann (1959) made the following observation:

> I don't know why people think of hell as a place where there is heat and where fires are burning. That is not hell. Hell is if you are frozen in isolation into a block of ice. That is where I have been (p. 14).

Interestingly, frozen is exactly how Dante Alighieri depicts the nineth and final circle of hell and this metaphorical understanding of suffering is a theme evident in my empirical material. A Swedish word that was frequently used by my participants is *utfryst*. *Utfryst* directly translates to "out frozen" and is best understood as the feeling of being left out in the cold. This captures how most of my participants describe the experience of loneliness: as emotionally painful and chilly. Understandably, this is an awful experience, which could explain the pessimistic thoughts and rationales that often follow.

Dissimilar and Ostracized

Apart from sadness and shame, another remarkable experience among the participants was the feeling of ostracization and rejection in the workplace. For some, this situation was explicit: colleagues were perceived as actively inhospitable and rude. For others, it was implicit: they sensed that colleagues avoided them and kept them out of plans. Considering the power of perceptions and expectations, this feeling can sometimes emerge even when others have no intentions to be exclusive. That is, colleagues might not even be aware of the individual's desire to be included. Nevertheless, the feeling of ostracization is real for the person experiencing it, and it is potentially a chilly experience. Similarly, the participants often felt that they did not share the same interests and background as their colleagues:

> Others at the office have more of a buddy relationship, and there are a few inside jokes and activities that I'm not in on. It can make me feel like I don't really fit in. I'm also a bit older than most of the others in the office. (SU3)

[109] Freud (1917/1963) writes, "In children the first phobias relating to situations are those of darkness and solitude. The former of those often persists throughout life; both are involved when a child feels the absence of some loved person who looks after it – its mother, that is to say. While I was in the next room, I heard a child who was afraid of the dark call out: 'Do speak to me, Auntie! I'm frightened!' 'Why, what good would that do? You can't see me.' To this the child replied: 'If someone speaks, it gets lighter.' Thus a *longing* felt in the dark is transformed into a *fear* of the dark" (p. 407; in Galanaki, 2013: 72).

> I feel lonely in some groups at work. I rarely feel that I belong. I don't like shallow discussions which are common in a workplace [. . .] I feel lonely on breaks. Because I find it difficult to participate in the conversation. I'm not super interested in the topics that most colleagues talk about. [. . .] I am a little different. (SS19)

> [Loneliness at work] means that the other colleagues belong together while I stand outside. (SS24)

Here, loneliness becomes associated with the absence of belonging: the individual perceives her peers as a homogenous group both in properties and interests and evaluates herself as a relative outsider (see Self-Categorization Theory in Chapter 2). Whether this is objectively the case is another question. As people tend to keep these thoughts and feelings to themselves, it is reasonable for an individual to think that they are alone to feel different. Considering Honneth's (1992) solidarity as a mode of recognition, these individuals may be lonely because they do not share a base of values (including interests and needs) with the group and therefore cannot participate in the collective jargon and etiquette. In this context, such behavior can be understood as an exchange of recognition. That is, jargon and etiquette demonstrate cultural commonality and are perhaps fundamental to group processes. From this perspective, just as the dissimilar individual may struggle to feel recognized as an equal by the group, she may be equally unable to recognize the other group members for their qualities.

Although the research participants above base their group status on personal factors, two other individuals highlight that one's role in the organization could also be a separating (or uniting) factor:

> I work with around 40 colleagues, but the responsibility I have is unique in the group. Sometimes I feel lonely partly because I don't follow the jargon and that my work tasks are unique. Sometimes it feels like I don't really get into the group because we don't have much in common [through work]. If I had had, say, three colleagues with the same work tasks, I would have blended in with them. (NR)

> Throughout my entire work life. I have been the "only one of my kind" at my workplaces. This often leads to me having no direct colleagues to collaborate with on projects [. . .] I sit by myself, and often people question what I actually do during the day. It has also led to me having "bonded" with few other people in the workplace. I have always found it difficult to "get in" social circles, but in the workplace it's pretty much a hundred percent of the time. (NR)

Both these participants compare themselves and their relationships with others in the workplace and perceive themselves as relatively socially isolated. This was also noticeable in vignettes 2 and 3, where the research participants became isolated due to their work tasks requiring minimal interaction. However, these participants seem to exhibit a self-protective attitude as they recognize that there is nothing wrong with themselves on a personal level: they have just become victims of professional isolation in the workplace. And so, they appear to justify their situation without blaming their peers. Although the situation may still be painful, it perhaps becomes more bearable as they distance themselves from it. I visit this coping practice later in this chapter.

In making sense of her feelings of workplace loneliness, another participant highlights that a person could also become a victim of the categorization processes of others:

> [When I got promoted to manager] I thought I was still the same person and that I could talk in the same way about our mission and our engagement [as before], but . . . I became stigmatized: I was assigned a role and a stereotype. People lost interest in who I really am [. . .] [They] misunderstood my good intentions and I was judged by some caricature idea of who I was based on my role [leader/manager]. It was like an iron curtain that came down and you are no longer one of us. (IP9)

This person links loneliness with explicit ostracization: she is no longer recognized as an equal by the group. Although she is technically their superior, her informal social status (i.e., popularity) within the group is possibly lower than before she was promoted. This somewhat complicates recognition theories. Although the individual may share a value horizon and contribute toward the common good, the group might still not recognize her as an equal. Perhaps this is a part of the struggle Honneth (1992) refers to: the group members deny the leader recognition in order to level their own position. However, as Fukuyama notes (1992), this may force the leader to seek even more recognition, feeding into a negative spiral. Indeed, loneliness in leaders is a recurring theme in both the theoretical and empirical material and is discussed in more depth shortly.

All these participants seem to have accepted their situation and hold little contempt towards their colleagues. This mindset is contrasted by another group who approach the experience less stoically. These research participants echo feelings of ostracization. Rather than finding them justified, they express antipathy toward their peers as well as toward themselves:

> I recognize myself in the loneliness [as described by someone else]. When I returned from maternity leave the company had reorganized and I now had to work alone without a team. My old team had ended up in another building. While I was away, new lunch-groups had formed and no one asked me if I wanted to come along. They could stand outside my room and discuss where they would go. It felt like pure bullying. Privately, I have a lot of friends and it's easy to get in touch with others, but at work I felt like I had the plague. I have never experienced anything like it. (NL)

Although this person categorizes the feeling as loneliness, she refuses to identify with being justifiably excluded. Consequently, there is a hint of anger and sadness in her writing. The conflict seems to stem from her expecting to be recognized as a natural member of the informal group despite being absent for months and no longer belonging to the formal workgroup. She relieves herself of blame by constructing the conflict as bullying, perhaps as a kind of self-defense mechanism. Regardless of whether it is intentional bullying, her pain is real. Echoing this statement, another lonely person refuses to identify with any criticism coming from his peers:

> [I] was told [by a manager] that pretty much all [my] colleagues refuse to work with me because I'm moody, I refuse to share knowledge, I'm introverted, I don't volunteer, etc. Accusations I really can't understand. [. . .] I was indirectly told to find a new job [. . .] the manager has sensed for many years that I am disliked by colleagues. My experience is that this is clearly bullying. (NF)

As with the earlier individual, whether this person is objectively bullied is beside the point. The relevant factor here is that he constructs his experience of loneliness as rooted in a situation of being bullied and rejected. This is what Honneth (1992) describes as perceived disrespect – i.e., denied recognition (solidarity). Another participant describes a similar disrespectful situation:

> [My workplace] has a very macho-dominated culture where everything is about partying, sleeping with girls, and making money. Repeat. Strange [irony?] how I was always pushed down for having different opinions and interests. [. . .] Eventually, I confronted [my colleagues] because they were making jokes at my expense . . . I was often the target because I was "weird" in their eyes. (IP1)

Later in the interview, this person suggests that loneliness can only be escaped by finding people who accept you for who you are (i.e., recognize you as a unique and equal individual). Because he lacked this at work, he eventually quit his job. This points to two separate coping practices that will be elaborated on later.

As noted, the feeling of disrespect (denied recognition) is potentially more painful than being alone (i.e., absent recognition) because the individual feels actively rejected. Additionally, the individual who experiences disrespect potentially realizes that she depends on an undependable group. In other words, her desire to receive recognition from the group entails a risk. Reflecting on this situation, the following quotation attributed to Mother Teresa comes to my mind:

> The biggest disease today is not leprosy or cancer or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for and deserted by everybody.

As Mother Teresa implies, it is the feeling of being unwanted.[110] Whether one is actually unwanted or abandoned is impossible for the individual to know. As André Malraux (1933/1961) puts it: "One never knows a human being, but one occasionally ceases to feel that one does not know him". From this perspective, existential solipsism (see Moustakas, 1961/2016; Mijuskovic, 2012) may be a twofold source of loneliness as it also provides space for pessimistic meta-representation. This may also be why people need continuous intersubjective recognition to maintain a positive self-relation. Understandably, when recognition is missing (or denied) and loneliness is present, a wide range of negative thoughts and antipathies may germinate.

Impostor Syndrome and Self-Contempt

In contrast to feelings of unjustified rejection, another recurrent experience among the research participants was feelings of inadequacy. Inadequacy was touched on earlier as it relates to feelings of being insignificant. A few participants frame this situation as "impostor syndrome" (*bedragarsyndrom*). That is, these participants doubt their value and whether they are worthy of recognition and reward. Once again, meta-representation enters the picture, although this time it is inversed (i.e., others potentially think better of you than you think of yourself). While this does not necessarily mean poor self-confidence, it could imply low self-esteem. Moreover, describing oneself as an imposter suggests a high level of self-consciousness and awareness of that the situation is largely psychological. Either way, what is interesting here is that the individual shifts her attention from external explanations to instead scrutinize her own flaws, potentially abandoning herself. Another participant makes a similar observation:

[110]A similar quotation is attributed to actor Robin Williams in the movie *World's Greatest Dad*: "I used to think the worst thing in life was to end up all alone. It's not. The worst thing in life is ending up with people who make you feel all alone."

> [When I feel lonely] sometimes it feels like I am being abandoned. That is of course not the case, but it could be that in the moment you abandon yourself. (IP7)

This loneliness, as Arendt (1978) and Rogers (1970) suggest, may be related to a person's self-relation. These scholars argue that an individual will not suffer from loneliness if she can keep herself company. However, loneliness could be the reason for deteriorating self-relation and self-esteem in the first place. Honneth (1992) addresses this by suggesting that solidarity (as a mode of recognition) is an essential source of self-esteem (see also Rousseau's *amour propre*). From this perspective, the individual acquires a sense of self-worth by being recognized as a valuable member of the group. As previously noted, this view echoes both Buber's (1954/2011) and Sartre's (1946/2007) intersubjective person, which was also elegantly captured by the participant in vignette 1. That is, when recognition is missing, the individual may begin to doubt herself and her value, again feeding into a negative spiral. This tendency is evident in several of the participants' responses:

> [Loneliness] is a chimera [*hjärnspöken*] that breaks down my self-esteem until you think everything is your fault. That you are the weirdo who should adapt. (IP1)

> When I feel lonely, I am also less self-confident. The self-confidence that I normally feel when I am with friends and family is like gone with the wind. (IP6)

This loop of declining self-esteem and growing self-doubt can lead to increasingly self-critical feelings and tendencies:

> When I feel lonely, I often wonder if there is something wrong with me. I think people in my surroundings only think well of me on a superficial level. But there is still something that inhibits me from reaching my colleagues in the way I would have liked. Maybe we also have a very different view of what friendship is. And different interests too [. . .] [It makes me] sad and I have a tendency to put blame on myself. Feel that I am flawed or insufficient. (IP8)

> No one asked [me to join for lunch] so I was left alone. I never fit in and felt like there was something wrong with me. (NF)

> I have been ostracized at work and it made it unbearable to stay. My colleagues had worked together for a while and found each other, and one of them did not like me for some reason and talked badly of me behind my back [. . .] It ended up with me being completely alone and

> undermined. I felt like crap and became self-conscious and figured something must be wrong with me. (NL)

Although the above participants construct loneliness as associated with feelings of self-doubt and self-consciousness, a negative cycle of self-esteem may also pour over to self-hatred:

> I feel alone and I am so [lonely]. I really need friends, to get to talk to people for real and to feel togetherness. At work I mostly work alone and in my free time I am by myself pretty much always. I think so horribly ill of myself and it feels hopeless to make friends because everyone already has their social networks. [. . .] I do not want acquaintances, only real friendship. (NO)

This person seems to suffer from a significant loss of self as her self-contempt makes her a poor friend to herself. At the same time, this individual suggests that only "real friendship" can cure her loneliness, which brings into question where the line between acquaintanceship and friendship lies. Reflecting on this situation, another participant offers the following observation:

> [My job involves] a lot of impersonal relationships, both with customers and colleagues. They are nice, we can laugh, but we don't have a lot in common beneath the surface. I think that we all maintain a bit of an agreeable facade, which makes it difficult to get closer, and let others in. It's nothing that is painful in the moment, but when I think about it, it's a bit sad. (SS5)

This quotation offers some insight into why it may be difficult to establish friendships in the workplace: it is perhaps necessary to keep people at a distance to maintain a professional persona. In other words, there is a tradeoff between being professional and personal. Consequently, being intimate and vulnerable in the workplace could jeopardize one's career in the organization. But this does not explain why anything less than friendship is deemed a defective relationship. On this note, the same participant elaborated:

> There is like a bubbling social energy within me that I don't know how or where to direct. I always find "flaws" in others which makes me judge them as unworthy of my energy. One is boring, the other has bad values, the third lives too far away, the fourth is my boss, the fifth is my customer etc. So, I like float through life in my loneliness, without really touching anyone, or letting anyone touch me. [. . .] It is not a specific event that makes me feel lonely. It is more like a diffuse feeling, a frustration which gnaws all the time. (SS5)

This person describes loneliness as a "bubbling social energy" that builds inside her but remains unproductive. Here, loneliness emerges as a desire to connect with others; however, when this energy is wasted, either on the wrong person or into the void, it becomes a source of pain and "gnawing frustration". This person also draws attention to how loneliness may be associated with tendencies that exacerbate the situation: she reserves her emotional energy for that idealized friend who never arrives because her expectations are perhaps impossible to meet. Consequently, she misses out on potential social and emotional intimacy, potentially depriving herself of a source of self-esteem and self-confidence in the long run. This kind of loneliness arguably borders on Weiss's (1973) ideas about social loneliness and may not be related to Honneth's (1992) solidarity after all. I will return to this later in this thesis.

Depression and Emptiness

The final, and perhaps direst, categorical experience that I note in my empirical material are feelings of depression and emptiness. Considering that I set out to study the "everyday kind of" loneliness experienced by people who are socially active, I was surprised to see so much hopelessness and helplessness:

> [Loneliness is] primarily a feeling of insignificance and helplessness. (SS25)

Drawing on this, it is possible that an unanswered need for help may produce feelings of loneliness. Epictetus (108/1907: 227), the stoic philosopher, notes that loneliness may be associated with feelings of helplessness, a view that Fromm-Reichmann (1959: 5) supports and a participant considers:

> [Loneliness] is a feeling [that emerges] when events and situations feel overwhelming to deal with alone. (SS4)

Quantitative research has found that people in need of social support (e.g., the sick and elderly) are more likely to experience loneliness (e.g., Hughes et al., 2010; Davidson & Rossall, 2015). It is possible that when people feel helpless, the dark becomes darker, the cold becomes colder, and the silence becomes a reminder of one's helplessness. In other words, loneliness potentially magnifies perceived threats, perhaps to push the individual toward changing the situation (or seeking help). However, as already mentioned, addressing the problem does not always mean reintegration as the individual may also perceive the immediate group as unreliable or even hostile. Similarly, several participants describe the experience of loneliness as hollowness, shallowness, and emptiness and thereby points to how the experience of loneliness can signify a lack of interpersonal depth:

> Loneliness for me is a kind of social meaninglessness, an emptiness. Interactions and social exchanges exist, but they don't matter. It is a feeling that arrives when I don't care about people in my vicinity, and

> they don't care about me. We just happen to be in each other's proximity, but we would rather be somewhere else, with other people. The feeling is the worst when I feel that I would really like to have more close relationships and that it is probably I who have ruined it for myself. (SS5)

> [Loneliness is] having no emotional contact, shallowness, when people just pass. (SS21)

> [Loneliness is] not having anyone to have deep social interactions with. (SS14)

> [When] I felt lonely it was hard to relax at work completely. And with that I felt that I had a very shallow relationship with everyone so I was on my guard all the time. (SS3)

> There is something keeping me from reaching out all the way to my colleagues like I want to. [. . .] Loneliness for me is to not feel a connection with others. When it feels like what connects us is so shallow and boring that it almost doesn't exist. (IP8)

Here, loneliness emerges as a kind of weightlessness, as the individual feels socially at sea, without an anchor. This can be compared with Durkheim's (1893/2014) *anomie* as a kind of cultural alienation. Another relevant Swedish word here is *vilsen*. *Vilsen* has no proper translation into English: a direct translation is "lost." However, there is another Swedish word for "lost," *borttappad*. *Vilsen* refers to when a person has lost her way, often existentially or spiritually. In other words, a person feels *vilsen* when she does not know how to direct her energy best. From Honneth's (1992) perspective, this could mean that the individual has no shared value horizon with the group and therefore does not know how to contribute and be recognized as a valuable member. That is, *vilsen* largely corresponds with loneliness as a "negative" experience (see Appendix A.2. for additional discussion on this and other relevant Swedish terms).

Moreover, the above participants seem to need some degree of emotional intimacy to discover the values that bind them with their colleagues. When the social climate is characterized by formality and superficiality, social interaction may feel meaningless. Inversely, belonging has been framed as a social adhesive or gravitational pull (see Chapter 2). Therefore, when belonging is lacking, it might feel like one is "floating" purposelessly, as another participant previously describes. If this is the case, we may ask why "only" half the workers report loneliness. One potential answer is that some individuals are perhaps simply more existentially

"sensitive" and may struggle to ever feel that desired connection with others. This existential awareness is evident in the following quotation:

> When I'm with other people I always feel lonely [*känner mig ensam*]. It's like I'm not really there. Only my shell/body is there, but my inside and soul look at everything from another direction, not from my eyes. It feels fake and sometimes not like I'm alive. I feel terribly lonely and left out when I'm with others. But I don't feel as lonely when I'm alone, then I know that "now I'm in my room all alone with my own thoughts, feelings, etc." Then I'm aware that I am alone [*är ensam*], and I can accept it, and I am allowed to be alone. [When I am alone] I don't need to try to fit in, to play a role, to play "myself" even though it only makes me awkward and makes people around me awkward. (NF)

Although this comment touches on the cognitive construction of loneliness, it also says much more. A captured lived experience like this is like a painting of what loneliness means to someone. It helps the reader understand the phenomenon without having experienced it herself. This comment also shows how Swedish people may struggle to make sense of their feelings when aloneness, loneliness, and solitude are expressed using the same word, *ensam*. This could be why many participants construct loneliness as a personal failure – a failure to attract recognition, a failure to reintegrate, and a failure to be autonomous. This attitude results in a readiness to give up. Such an attitude largely combines the negative traits of Riesman's (1950/2001) other-directed and inner-directed characters. In such a situation, no level of personal achievement is likely to outweigh the feeling of social defeat:

> [. . .] it's so damn sad. I am an outgoing, smart woman in her 30s who has her dream job, but I feel so damn lonely. And then you go home and tell your partner how failed you feel because you don't have any friends at work. (SS23)

This quotation reiterates the shame and sadness in loneliness and demonstrates how fine the line is between loneliness and depression. Moreover, this loneliness can result in stress and anxiety:

> [Loneliness gave me] stomachache, held my breath, stress hit me [. . .] was constantly on my guard [. . .] was and am lonely. Disappointed. Afraid. Anxious. (IP3)

> [The] loneliness which sometimes comes as a "feeling" is difficult, anxious, and stressful. I want to belong to a collegial context at work,

> where I can work independently, but also have a group to belong to and collaborate with. (SS8)

In the end, many of the experiences noted in this chapter can be captured as a kind of anxiety. However, anxiety is a vague term as some associate it with nervousness, anguish, and depression, which is not what I mean here. Loneliness as anxiety is more like a gnawing frustration or a restless feeling, both evident in previous quotations. Another participant suggests the anxiety associated with loneliness is "a bubbling sensation," a motive force but without direction, resulting in feeling *vilsen*. Here, loneliness and boredom converge as they both arguably try to get the individual moving. However, as boredom is also a common experience in the workplace, it is difficult to say where workplace boredom ends and workplace loneliness begins. To explore this, I asked all interviewees whether they were bored at work. Most said they were not. Although my empirical sample is too small to make any conclusions, it does suggest that the two are not dependent. However, it is also possible that loneliness overwrites feelings of boredom.

The final experiential quotation I want to share is not about workplace loneliness but the opposite. The next quotation captures the loneliness of an unemployed individual and illustrates the outcome a person may face if she is unable to break free of the downward spiral of loneliness:

> Another year of misery and isolation. Status: trash all around the apartment, long hair everywhere, liquor, porn, unemployed, haven't bathed in a week, or a month. My ex celebrated new years with a threesome. I'm eating fast-food or nothing. I have no real friends and rarely hang out with people. [. . .] I want to be alone [*själv*], I don't want to be in the big world, I want to live in my own misery. [. . .] I don't have the energy to spend time with people. I consume various psychiatric drugs. I'm 24 now and I will live like this until 30, then I'll end my life. If my unemployment allowance is withdrawn . . . I'll commit suicide. I don't mind dying. But I must say loneliness [*ensamhet*] is the worst of all. I miss [my ex]. Life is empty. Everyone I know is disappearing. [. . .] Short-lived be the loneliness, let us die, and succumb into the land of happiness and emptiness. (NF)

Epitomizing the misanthropic attitudes that may come with loneliness, the individual ends the post by calling the rest of the online community fascist and ignorant. This response may be seen as self-protective behavior: he rejects everyone before they can reject him. Furthermore, by explicitly expressing disinterest in recognition, he will not feel like a failure when he receives no sympathy. At the same time, this must be understood as a cry for help; otherwise, he would not have cared to publish this in the first place. This person vividly illustrates the vicious

cycle loneliness can become and how it can produce both hate of self and hate of others. He describes his lonely condition as a source of horror, but he is so deep in the abyss that he cannot see the light. Instead, he protects the remnants of himself by hardening his shell and repelling the outside world. This suggests that when loneliness cannot be avoided, depression naturally follows. For a person who has become consumed by loneliness, death may seem a relief.

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In this section, I have analyzed how workplace loneliness is experienced, but I have also touched upon the cognitive aspects of the phenomenon. I have demonstrated that while some people see loneliness as stemming from unjust situations, there are those who have accepted it more stoically. Both cognitive approaches imply that experiencing loneliness makes one a "victim." However, some people seem to choose loneliness, as will be seen in the next section. By reviewing how people cope with workplace loneliness, it may be noted that even those who shun loneliness may be experiencing some level of control as they choose the alternative that causes them the least amount of pain.

Coping Practices

Loneliness might not be an expressive emotion in terms of facial movements or body language, but it does seem to be associated with specific behavioral and cognitive activities. Whereas the previous section primarily deals with how workplace loneliness is experienced, this section focuses on how loneliness manifests in organizations through coping practices. Interestingly, although the experience of loneliness arguably only indirectly affects workplaces, coping practices may have a more immediate impact on the surrounding social environment. Therefore, this material facilitates a discussion on the role of loneliness in organizations, which I will pick up later in this thesis. Moreover, in this section, the "paradoxical nature" of loneliness will be notable – i.e., loneliness seems to be associated with diametrically opposing behaviors. Whereas some people cope with loneliness by being more gregarious and seeking social proximity, other people cope with loneliness by withdrawing socially and distracting themselves from the pain. In addition, I also note more extreme coping practices, such as pushing people away and harboring peer contempt. Interestingly, some people also seem to cope with workplace loneliness by reconstructing it into something that gives them a sense of pride. All these observations further emphasize the complexity of loneliness and how difficult it may be to quantify and measure. I begin this section with perhaps the most predictable and common coping practices for workplace loneliness – reintegration and conformity.

Reintegration and Conformity

According to prominent neuroscientists, loneliness has evolved to protect individuals from the dangers of isolation by encouraging them to seek reintegration (see Cacioppo, 2009). While (re)integration is only one of several coping practices visible in my empirical material, it is one of the most common. For example, the Swedish word *sällskapssjuka* frequently appears in my data set, especially the netnographic material. *Sällskapssjuka* is a word I have not used for myself in more than a decade because, like loneliness, it is a stigmatized term. *Sällskapssjuka* does not have a simple equivalent in English. *Sällskap* means "company" or "companionship" and *sjuka* means "sickness". Therefore, a direct translation would be "companionship sickness". This makes it sound as if someone has become sick from companionship, but the meaning of *sällskapssjuka* is the opposite. *Sällskapssjuka* emerges when the desire for companionship becomes so great that it is experienced as discomfort or even pain. Therefore, *sällskapssjuka* may be seen as an experiential account of loneliness, although it also has a behavioral component and can be seen as a coping mechanism. A loose parallel may be made with the meaning of the word "promiscuous"; although *sällskapssjuka* does not imply a desire for sexual interaction, it may very much lead to it. Another comparison can be made with the word "gregarious" (as an adjective for a person who is fond of sociability), but here the intensity and direction of action in *sällskapssjuka* are lost. On the nature of this "sickness," one individual made the following observation:

> I feel a stress within me which might originate from wanting to get to know everyone quickly. It's like I want to be best buddies with everyone. I want to show my best sides and show who I am as a person. I want them to like me. For example, if I miss an after-party I feel terrible the next day because everyone else bonded and had fun while I was sleeping. I've always had this problem. I want to get to know everyone on a deeper level. I want them to see my personality and like me. And it should happen quickly. (NF)

This person constructs loneliness as a kind of stress and expresses a fear of "falling behind" in the social sphere, which could also be understood as a Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). This fear motivates him to participate in social activities, but it also brings him pain and frustration. Similarly, many participants associate their feelings of loneliness with a prosocial urge:

> [When I feel lonely] I plan more events with friends. [. . .] In social media I try not to post pictures of me with my family and emphasize photos of me with my friends instead. (IP6)

Not only is this person suggesting that loneliness makes her seek out more social interaction, but it also makes her put effort into appearing as more socially active. Here, she possibly worries that being seen as lonely and isolated may damage her

social status and reinforce her situation. Consequently, she puts forward an image of herself that does not necessarily match her private and inner life. Although successful reintegration could offer her a way out of loneliness, this tendency may also lead to impostor syndrome (and self-alienation), declining self-esteem, and increasing loneliness, as discussed in the previous section. This negative aspect of integration is illustrated by a Flashback member:

> I'm so terrified of being rejected and alone that it affects my behavior with other people. I don't dare to take initiative in romantic situations. I don't dare to open myself to new people or deepen friendships because I'm afraid of being rejected and seen as weird, less worthy, or an idiot. I'm scared of studying because I have extreme performance anxiety and I fear failing the studies. I can't deal with this any longer. Everything I put up with is a facade for my friends and family. (NF)

In this case, his facade has become a safeguard against rejection. It is rooted in the feeling that he is not good enough for others to like him, so he needs to be better than himself. Consequently, he constructs loneliness as associated with performance anxiety (and perfectionism), but this will unlikely solve the underlying fear of rejection. On a similar note, one participant aligns loneliness with an inclination to work harder:

> I was employed via a consultant firm for 6 months [. . .] It felt weird [. . .] like I was excluded [*utanför*] and I was only there to do one specific thing, not because anyone wanted me there [. . .] I needed to be very visible [*tydlig*] [. . .] and work super hard, for my boss to notice me. (IP10)

The same participant concludes that loneliness means not being recognized for who she truly is (how she sees herself) and that this feeling pushes her to seek out more recognition. In this light, loneliness emerges as both paralyzing and motivating, which points to the potential normative power of loneliness, a paradox also evident in the following two participants' recollections:

> [Loneliness makes me] try to adjust to a group I wouldn't really want to be a part of. (SS4)

> [When lonely] I am either the strong one who is fighting to tolerate feeling lonely. Or I am the very tiny person who feels like a wet and invisible speck. [It makes me] act in a way I don't want. Become the "nice" colleague for example. Only to once again realize that "it makes no difference." I still don't count. (IP3)

Here, loneliness motivates the individual to reintegrate with the group by adhering to norms and expectations albeit reluctantly. This conundrum is captured by Honneth (1992) in his claim that the "struggle for recognition" governs ethical life. From this perspective, effort (performance) can be seen as a coping practice, where the individual seeks recognition from the group by demonstrating her worth. However, this can also be viewed as a form of submissive behavior, where the individual succumbs to external demands, potentially at the cost of compromising her own principles and self-identity, as previously discussed. Like the "impostor syndrome," this can lead to feelings of fraudulence – i.e., the individual does not really fit in with the group, and that she could become ostracized if the group realizes this. Consequently, some individuals might resort to concealing their true selves. Beyond loneliness' normative dimension, the preceding quotations underscore that workplace loneliness is perhaps less about a lack of friendship or love and more about a sense of belonging to a group:

> I feel that I am constantly switching between wanting belonging and a strive to be able to stand alone, to feel secure in myself and not be affected to much by the group. I enjoy going my own way, which perhaps isn't ideal in a [work group]. I can long to belong to a context but this can also make me "afraid" of becoming consumed/engulfed [*uppslukas*]. To risk losing that [room for maneuver/power] that I feel as long as I stay on the outside. At the same time, I think that fellowship in the workplace around the mission and collaboration is incredibly important. [. . .] I can see how loneliness makes people unhealthy in organizations. [. . .] Workplace loneliness for me is a constant balance of wanting and not wanting. I know that when I have felt lonely or excluded it is mostly about my own demons, own thoughts and feelings. [. . .] **I don't need a private togetherness at work, but it feels good to have a work togetherness with the mission in focus.** (SS15; bold is my emphasis)

Beyond making a clear distinction between social/emotional and workplace loneliness, this quotation epitomizes the paradoxical nature of the phenomenon: she describes it as a state of "wanting and not wanting." Here, it is evident that loneliness pulls the individual toward two extremes. Ultimately, this could be seen as a trade-off between individuality (autonomy) and togetherness (connection); the individual adapts to the group at the expense of her independence but may harvest greater self-worth in turn. Here is another overlap with both Riesman's (1950/2001) other-directed and inner-directed characters. Integrating the analysis in the previous section with Riesman's sentiment, it may be suggested that the other-directed character is at greater risk of "abandoning" herself as she seeks approval from others. Meanwhile, the inner-directed character faces a greater probability of being

rejected by others as she refuses social norms. However, I do not think there is such a thing as Riesman's archetypical characters. Rather, I see this as a trade-off that all people face in all social situations. As with any trade-off, the individual likely assesses the risks and rewards of her actions. The viability of proximity-seeking as a coping strategy might, therefore, depend on whether the benefits of group membership outweigh the associated costs. Conversely, if the costs of group membership exceed the benefits, the individual could prefer seclusion and might even feel a sense of repulsion. This preference for seclusion is a striking pattern in the empirical data, which is analyzed in the following section.

Withdrawal and Distraction

In contrast to the neuroscientific theory on loneliness (e.g., Cacioppo, 2009), a second common coping pattern of workplace loneliness in my empirical material is social withdrawal. This tendency is also observed in the theoretical material: Nietzsche (1888/2007), for example, concludes that "[t]o suffer from solitude is likewise an objection – I have always suffered only from the 'multitude'" (p. 34) and phrased it even more frankly through the voice of a fictional character: "company is truly more lonely than to be alone!" (Nietzsche, 1883/1961:177). Similarly, Arendt (1968) argues that "loneliness shows itself most sharply in the company with others" (p. 174). These sentiments suggest that aloneness can sometimes be a refuge from the loneliness experienced in a crowd, and antisocial tendencies might be a manifestation of social alienation and loneliness, a view evident in Vignette 1 and one that is echoed by many participants in this chapter. Furthermore, some participants shared that their feelings of loneliness led them to leave their jobs or disengage from social activities at work:

> I felt misunderstood and pretty lonely [. . .] it resulted in me finding another job and resigning. (SS22)

> When I feel lonely, I've learned to step into other contexts. It may be somewhere else, find a colleague in another workplace. [. . .] Tell someone in the family, or a friend. [. . .] [but also] dare to feel the loneliness feeling and tend to myself. (SS21)

The latter quotation suggests that having a social network outside of the workgroup enables her to tolerate momentary loneliness at work. This tactic possibly allows her to avoid confronting the situation in the workplace. The first quotation shows that when the problem feels irresolvable, more drastic measures may be needed. However, leaving the job is not always an option, as demonstrated in Vignette 3, where poor self-esteem hindered the participant from applying for new jobs. In such situations, individuals may need to find other ways to cope with workplace loneliness. For example, two participants link their feelings of loneliness with compulsions for excessive shopping and extensive social media use, echoing David

Hume's (1738/1986) belief that people pursue entertainment to temporarily numb feelings of disconnection.[111]

In the previous section, I note that some people associate loneliness with proximity-seeking tendencies. From this perspective, the individual attempts to cope with loneliness by pursuing reintegration, but this method may not always be successful. For example, two participants share that although their initial response to loneliness was to seek out the group, they chose to distance themselves when their attempts to connect were unsuccessful:

> Sometimes I feel that I really want to break that thing between me and others [colleagues] but when I fail, I withdraw. (SU4)

> I think about it and think that I should change myself, let others in, and try to get closer to them. But the next moment it feels hopeless, and I just want to pull away even more. (SS5)

In these instances, loneliness results in a desire to withdraw and escape the social discomfort within the group. This is a coping practice that Wright (2005) notes in her Loneliness at Work model. Similarly, Slater (1970/2006) emphasizes that loneliness can produce a desire for withdrawal and independence. A few participants also associate loneliness with a desire to turn inward to protect themselves from others:

> [Loneliness makes me] turn inward, quiet, withdraw in a way that of course makes me even more isolated and contributes to a stronger feeling of loneliness. [. . .] It is difficult to escape, it easily becomes a downward spiral. (SS25)

Like Slater (1970/2006), this person believes that such behavior may not always be productive, a view that is shared by few other participants:

> I always eat lunch by myself. Only talk to a few. Hate it. [. . .] I wonder if I am socially incompetent. Have asked if someone wants to have lunch, but when they decline, I never dare to ask again. I leave before the others go for lunch to not feel "rejected" when they leave in crowds. (NF)

[111] Hume (1738/1986) wrote: "Man is altogether insufficient to support himself; and that when you loosen all the holds, which he has of external objects, he immediately drops down into the deepest melancholy and despair. From this ... proceeds that continual search after amusement in gaming, in hunting, in business; by which we endeavour to forget ourselves, and excite our spirits from the languid state, into which they fall, when not sustain'd by some brisk and lively emotion." (p. 402)

> [When I'm lonely], I feel exposed and vulnerable. Not in a creative way . . . it draws out nonconstructive sides. It makes me want to defend myself and protect myself from assaults. Because I'm not seen for who I am, I also cannot tell anyone about how the situation affects me. (SS9)

> With time [as I was lonely] I felt that I started to distance myself from the group, which creates more ostracization. Generally, my fear of loneliness is about loneliness in groups. (SS3)

These participants acknowledge that their inclination towards seclusion may intensify their feelings of loneliness. Furthermore, these quotations suggest that personal experiences of loneliness can have broader implications, an issue that another participant identifies:

> I think it is relatively beautiful to be alone and daydream and ponder and do whatever comes to my mind, for example watch a movie to escape reality, instead of being forced [to work] and pretend to be happy and satisfied with life and pretend like if I don't hate myself or despise myself. If you don't socialize, you don't have to be social or perform socially. [. . .] I am not in a good place with my employer because I have missed important meetings and I am just a dead weight and a source for concern [to them]. [. . .] I don't want to go there. [I] have nothing to contribute! (NO)

According to the participants above, although withdrawal may appear to be a solution to loneliness (e.g., to escape acute ostracism or bullying), it is also a deceptive mistress. As demonstrated in Vignette 1, missing out on social interactions may erode an individual's self-esteem. Like a living frog that will cook itself in gradually heated water,[112] an individual coping with loneliness by shutting others out may face a similar fate. At the same time, the individual who chooses seclusion resigns from the endless struggle for recognition. For those who can keep themselves company, this may be absolute freedom. However, as Nietzsche and Aristotle (among others) suggest, such a person is arguably superhuman.

In Chapter 3 (Theoretical Framework), I discuss how loneliness might be associated with collectivistic and individualistic movements, both individual and structural. In the previous two sections, this paradox has once again appeared. As Buber (1942/2005) suggests, these bilateral tendencies and urges may even be expressions (or coping mechanisms) of loneliness. Here, collectivistic and prosocial activities

[112] While the "Boiling Frog" apologue is an urban myth, the metaphor is useful for understanding people's often apathetic response to gradual change. For example, this aspect of human cognition is strikingly visible in the Stanford Prison Experiment (the Milgram experiment) , where research participants' zone of acceptance was stretched to the point of being ready to kill another individual.

offer a way for the individual to receive more recognition, while individualistic and antisocial tendencies potentially dismantle the need for recognition from within (as seen in Vignette 4, among others). Moreover, in an individualistic culture, the demonstration of autonomy and self-efficacy might be deemed necessary for being accepted as a valuable member. On this note, another Swedish word that may be associated with both loneliness and *sällskapssjuka* (see above) is *bekräftelsebehov* – "the need for recognition/validation/approval"). However, unlike Honneth's (1992) universal desire for recognition, *bekräftelsebehov* is typically considered a trait of weakness in Swedish culture. People with a *bekräftelsebehov* are seen as needy and clingy, like Riesman's (1950/2001) other-directed character (see Appendix A.2. for a discussion on Swedish culture). To avoid rejection, Swedes may, therefore, suppress their *bekräftelsebehov* and *sällskapssjuka*. However, during this process, they may become both self-alienated and socially estranged. Clearly, culture affects how loneliness manifests and is appraised.

Repulsion and Peer Contempt

A third notable behavioral pattern in my empirical material is social repulsion. Social repulsion can be seen as a more extreme form of withdrawal. That is, when disengagement is not enough, some people may feel the need to repel colleagues to protect themselves from the most acute feelings of loneliness. Although this theme is rarely expressed in the interviews and surveys, it is common in the netnographic material:

> I'm enormously disturbed by all relation-oriented and work-disinclined people who take every opportunity to avoid work. The *fika* break [coffee break] is such an opportunity to discuss house-wagons [recreational vehicles], [World Cup] soccer, and other crap while others have to work hard and bear responsibility, which they in good conscience avoid. (NF)

Fika is a popular social activity in Swedish culture, both in private and professional spheres, which usually involves conversation over pastries and coffee. *Fika* is encouraged by most employers and often considered part of working hours. In a thread related to workplace loneliness, a few people discuss why some people avoid *fika* in the office:

> [I avoid *fika* at work], [b]ecause I don't have a need to sit and talk to a group of people that I have nothing in common with. (NF)

This comment resulted in a few comments defending *fikas* in the workplace, arguing that *fika* is necessary for colleagues to find things they have in common. A "pro-*fika*" individual also suggests that people who avoid *fikas* are loners who only make things worse for themselves. In response to this comment, the following retort was offered:

> This [the previous comments] is the reason I don't choose a conventional *Jante-life* [emphasis on the collective not the individual]. To always be told to engage in stupid fucking chit-chat and *fika* 50 times a day. And if I don't want to, I'm an outcast??? No, I don't want to get closer to worthless idiots who plan to work their whole fucking lives and force others into the "community," which basically is about relying on each other socially. Only mediocre people love to *fika* (and meetings) and the main reason why is like with alcoholics who drink together on a park bench: you're supposed to share the misery collectively with everyone else who has made the same decision. (NF)

While this individual demonstrates contempt for his colleagues, he also sees himself as a victim. As implied with the derogative use of *jante*,[113] he believes that he is oppressed by the collective. However, considering the experiences and coping practices analyzed so far in this chapter, it is possible that this person feels ostracized by his colleagues and unable to form meaningful connections. This is understandably a painful situation, and perhaps to deal with this pain, he emotionally severs himself from the group. Whether his plight is self-inflicted or not is hard to say. Maybe he is a victim: he has not chosen his colleagues, and perhaps they are all "worthless idiots."[114] The latter is unlikely, but some people may perhaps be better off alone. Offering more insight into the ambivalence of this situation, another person responds:

> I have [. . .] post-traumatic stress syndrome and often feel terrible. I've been accused of "dragging the group down" without saying a single word. So, it's better to be alone. It's also hard to sit and talk to people who are too fickle and have never walked the hard path in life. It's also difficult to fake laugh at jokes and back-talk about other people. [. . .] Better let the fickle people be their own group if they'd rather be funny than understanding. [. . .] No one at my job knows about my hard

[113] *Jante* is a derogative for the collectivistic Scandinavian. It was originally formulated in 1933 by Sandemose and reads as a manifesto for Scandinavian solidarity. It includes normative statements such as "Do not think you are anything special," and "Do not think you are better than us" (Sandemose, 1933). Sandemose called it *Jantelagen* [The Jante Law], and this has become a concept endorsed by people who value collectivism and despised by those who sympathize with individualism. Meanwhile, *Jantelagen*, as intended by Sandemose, is severely misunderstood. It is thought to represent the ideology of the collectivist lower classes, but Sandemose's work is fiction and the ones expressing *Jantelagen* are the people in power: the bourgeoisie and the leaders of the church and the state. Sandemose's work is a Marxist critique of how the upper classes oppress and exploit the proletariat. Sandemose was not proposing *Jantelagen*, he was criticizing it. Today, *Jantelagen* has unironically (yet ironically) assumed the opposite meaning and is often used by "individualists" as a martyr's crown.

[114] From another perspective, his comment could also be seen as an expression of loneliness as he feels disrespected by the online community and fights to receive recognition for being an autonomous individual, which produces corrective behaviors in others. On this note, anger stemming from disrespect corresponds with moral anger as discussed in Chapter 3.

> childhood and I don't have the energy to sit around and giggle over a cup of coffee in a group. I'm rather quiet and do my job. Focusing on the most important so to speak. Let them think I'm weird [. . .] But of course you are welcome to come over to me if you really want to get to know me a little better. Then I'm often happy. But it rarely happens, it's easier to stare and back-talk about how weird the person [herself] is. (NF)

At first, this post appears to demonstrate an altruistic attitude: the group thrives without me, so it is best I leave them be. But it is also a case of self-victimization and martyrdom. As the post develops, it becomes apparent that she desperately wants someone to reach out to her, but when no one does, she uses the situation to legitimize her antisocial tendencies, potentially further cementing her position. Again, loneliness emerges as unfulfilled expectations for recognition. But when this desire is insatiable, it may be easier to kill the appetite altogether by cultivating disgust.

The link between peer contempt and loneliness can also be explained by belonging, or rather the desire to not belong and the desire to belong elsewhere. As noted in Chapter 2 (Previous Research), people do not always want to be a part of their immediate group, especially not if they disidentify with it. This relates to the feeling of being dissimilar (a relative outsider) and the fear of giving up oneself to fit into the group (i.e., conformity and self-alienation). But in many social situations, the individual is unable to withdraw; people are forced to interact with others, often strangers, in schools and workplaces. These organizations also typically separate people based on status and merit (e.g., grades and titles). This categorization of others potentially denies people of both their desire for connection and independence. This structural issue is discussed along Durkheim's (1893/2014) *anomie* and Buber's (1942/2005) political philosophy in Chapter 3. From this perspective, people may feel lonely, alienated, and socially suffocated at the same time. These overlapping responses could explain some of the paradoxical experiences and coping practices the participants associate with workplace loneliness.

Reconstruction and Pride

So far in this section, I note how people cope with workplace loneliness by avoiding it, either through reintegration or disassociation. To these people, loneliness is a negative ailment and a source of suffering that they want to escape. However, a few participants enjoy not just solitude but also cherish the state of loneliness. These people appear to associate loneliness with freedom:

> [Loneliness means] that I feel free and I feel proud of myself. [. . .] I hate group pressure. (SS17)

> Loneliness has positive sides. It has helped me find my own thoughts, my own values, to not be consumed by group-mentality. To feel anchored in who I want to be. (IP9)

> I enjoy being lonely. In fact, I love being lonely. [. . .] I'm that kind of person who always feels lonely. You are lonely when you are born and lonely when you die. But I am not worried about this feeling–I am what I am, it is what it is, and it is there all the time. [. . .] it may sound negative, but it really isn't. (IP4)

Initially, it may seem that these research participants have "misunderstood" loneliness, equating it with the pleasure of solitude. However, a deeper examination suggests otherwise. They seem to share Schopenhauer's (1851/2017) and Nietzsche's (1886/1999) sentiments that being able to tolerate loneliness means being free. In this context, aloneness and solitude offer mere temporary retreat, and loneliness is a sign of a more radical severance from the collective. Indeed, being peerless can be lonely, but it also means freedom from peer pressure. And so, loneliness becomes associated with freedom, and even the feelings of ostracization can be transformed into proof of individual strength. For example, one participant links her experience of loneliness with personal and professional development:

> When I was new here, I didn't feel welcomed. I am one of the few who has a university degree [1 year Master's] and I think that's something the others are annoyed with. As if they think I think I am better than them. [. . .] I think they saw me as a threat. In the beginning, I found it difficult, but when nothing changed, I felt like, "well if they want me to be a threat, I guess I'll be one. I will show them that I am better than them." [. . .] The first time I was awarded "seller of the month," I received mostly angry gazes. It felt both good and bad at the same time. [. . .] Sometimes I wonder what I have become, I don't really recognize myself. In school I was always the kind one and friends with everyone. [. . .] I think that they [colleagues] made me this way [competitive]. (SU5)

As she describes, when she grew into her professional role, she became less sympathetic with her colleagues but also more resistant to their negative opinions of her. It is possible that she substituted group membership with achievement to build self-esteem. Here, Rousseau distinguishes between self-esteem derived from intersubjective recognition (*amour propre*) and a sort of self-love derived from self-preservation (*amour de soi*) (see Bertram, 2010). From this perspective, achievement and individual strength could be seen as a pursuit of *amour de soi* (although it may also be a means to attain intersubjective recognition in an individualist culture, as already discussed). The research participant above also

draws attention to Fukuyama's (1992) megalothymia, suggesting that pain for denied thumos (as isothymia) can potentially be overwritten by being recognized as a superior. From this perspective, the individual's achievement-seeking behavior could be a coping method for not being recognized as a peer by the group in the first place: she implies that the group made her the "monster" they feared. Nevertheless, she is still arguably affected by loneliness, only that it is channeled into determination and effort. This individual characterizes Nietzsche's sentiment that the greatest people are those who can be most lonely; but at the same time, she has become self-alienated: she does not recognize herself (although she does not say whether her new self is better or worse).

The analysis above makes me think of a common Swedish proverb *"Ensam är stark"* (see Holm, 1986:41), which reads like a Nietzschean aphorism and directly translates to "alone/lonely is strong," but the proper translation is rather "the power of one." It is an individualistic ideal, but as noted, this romanticization of independence could also be a coping method for loneliness. As I discussed in Chapter 3, individualism potentially spares the individual from the suffering of loneliness by glorifying it (see Buber, 1942/2005). But the pursuit of individualist freedom can also feed the negative cycle of loneliness (see Slater, 1970/2006). This underscores the power a person wields in interpreting and shaping her own emotional response. Here, overcoming the fear of loneliness can produce pride and learning to live with loneliness becomes synonymous with self-fulfillment (as suggested by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as well as Moustakas and Mijuskovic). In line with this, previous research indicates that it is lonely at the top (e.g., Jackson, 1977), a sentiment that two participants who are managers share. In a related vein, the Swedish (online) magazine *Chefstidningen* (*Boss Newspaper*) published an article discussing the loneliness inherent in leadership roles:

> It is lonely at the top, so it is said – and surely the wind blows cold sometimes. To feel lonely as a boss is natural and something which comes with the job. The first step around this obstacle is to accept it, and your own feelings. (NO)

In the same article, the CEO of the Swedish Migration Agency at that time made the following claim:

> [I]t [loneliness] is a natural part of leadership and I know that it's not about my personality, but about my job. It is something you have to learn to live with and not take personally. (NO)

On the one hand, this view encourages a constructive way of looking at it: managers should not blame themselves for their loneliness. On the other hand, it could also promote a fatalistic attitude where there seems to be nothing that can be done except

acceptance. Another manager in the same article elaborated on what this means for him:

> I need to show that I enjoy coming to work, if I have had a terrible night, I need to shake that off before I enter the office. In that sense I am lonely, because I to some extent play a role [. . .] It is about maintaining credibility as a natural leader. (NO)

This is a literal manifestation of Hochschild's (1979/2012) concept of emotion management. Although Hochschild's flight attendants only had to maintain face toward passengers, the manager must keep this facade toward everyone in the organization. As a result, the manager is expected not to show vulnerability and often finds it difficult to draw strength from peers. This is also evident in Hill's (1992/2003) study of managers (see Chapter 2 footnote). Regarding the inevitable loneliness of being a manager, the CEO of *Migrationsverket* added:

> You need to have the insight that there is nothing wrong with feeling lonely, but rather completely natural. And you know what? Sometimes there might even be a charm to it. In those moments [when you feel lonely as a boss] you know that you are making a difference, that these are the decisions that create the future of this organization. That you need to take responsibility as a leader. (NO)

Here, it becomes clear how loneliness is romanticized and reconstructed into something positive: the CEO of *Migrationsverket* uses his own painful feelings as an indication of doing things that matter. This attitude may be captured with the quip "no pain, no gain," where power and freedom may be gained for the price of loneliness. This also highlights humans' ambiguous relationship with pain: people are sometimes happy to suffer if they think the reward is worth it. This further emphasizes that pain is not inherently bad and that it can even be transformed into a positive experience if it is found righteous. Viktor Frankl (1959/2004), paraphrasing Nietzsche, concludes that "[h]e who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*" (p. 84). That is, people only suffer when they perceive their pain as meaningless. Making sense of pain can therefore be a crucial coping mechanism against suffering. However, it is questionable how common it is to have this relationship with loneliness as most of the participants see no redeeming qualities in loneliness, only depression and emptiness. But while only a few participants actively choose loneliness, most appear to be more or less in control of their situation: they choose an alternative – reintegration, withdrawal, or repulsion – that causes them the least pain. However, whether their choices will result in long-term favorable outcomes is beyond the scope of this study.

Finally, regarding the topic of loneliness in managers and leaders, Although I did not explicitly ask all the participants whether they identify as a manager, I recognize that most, if not all, people participate in asymmetrical power relationships at work. Moreover, these hierarchies are complex and shifting, which means that individuals move between situations where they are expected to lead or manage and situations where they are to follow and serve. From this perspective, it is less interesting what title a person holds, and more interesting what interactions and situations they face at work. For this reason, the relationship between (perceived) hierarchical relationships and loneliness is a topic I will consider further in the next chapter, even though my empirical material is not specifically dealing with loneliness in managers and leaders.

Summary

In this chapter, I examine how the participants articulate their experiences of workplace loneliness, presenting my findings both narratively and categorically. Rather than distilling this into a single answer, I underscore the multifaceted feelings, thoughts, and behaviors associated with this phenomenon. In this context, loneliness emerges as a complex construct interwoven with contrasting emotions and coping practices.

The participants indicate that loneliness, resulting from perceived ostracization, is generally experienced as painful and can lead to feelings of shame, sadness, and even anger, where shame and sadness signify acceptance or resignation and anger appears to be primarily connected to perceived injustice. Consequently, many participants reveal that they manage loneliness by adapting to their social environment to evade or prevent being ostracized. This adaptation, however, can be perceived as burdensome and may lead to another form of loneliness, stemming from the abandonment of one's personal values and idiosyncrasies. Interestingly, some participants also express that loneliness can evoke sensations of freedom and strength when chosen over succumbing to peer pressure. These individuals seem to cope with workplace loneliness through antisocial behavior and withdrawal. To make sense of this apparent contradiction within loneliness coping strategies, I highlight the dual human need for connection and autonomy and suggest that loneliness is perhaps best understood as a process rather than as a situation or emotional instance. This concept of loneliness as a process is a topic I will return to later in this thesis.

Although the feelings and activities discussed in this chapter point to how loneliness may manifest in the workplace, they should not be mistaken for any "communicative expression" of loneliness, as is the case with other emotions such as happy laughter, sad crying, or angry screaming. Indeed, my empirical material says little to nothing about what loneliness looks like from the outside (i.e., how to

identify loneliness in someone else). So, despite all the elaborate descriptions found in this chapter, loneliness remains a hidden "emotion" in organizations, although some steps have been taken toward unraveling its "motions."

6. Why People Feel Lonely at Work

Having addressed how my research participants experience and cope with workplace loneliness, I will now turn to the third research question: Why do people feel lonely at work? To answer this question, I explicitly invoke the theoretical framework and "read between the lines" of the empirical material. In other words, this chapter is not about how the participants describe their loneliness, although that was the starting point, but about the potential underlying mechanisms and processes that make people feel lonely at work. That said, it is not my intention to psychologize the individual participants but take note of patterns on a group level that may be relevant to understanding workplace loneliness. This will also facilitate the forthcoming discussion on the role of loneliness in organizations. To reiterate, I identify in my theoretical framework three perspectives that can address why people feel lonely at work: loneliness as a consequence (and source of) self-alienation; loneliness as a symptom of social alienation; and loneliness as an unfulfilled desire for recognition (see Chapter 3). In this chapter, I apply and analyze these three perspectives separately, but I also make a case for how they relate to each other.

Moreover, to provide a comprehensive perspective of why people feel lonely at work, I consider that loneliness can emerge in very different situations. For example, my theoretical and empirical materials indicate at least three distinct settings: feeling lonely when alone; feeling lonely when in a crowd; and feeling lonely as a leader. Although one answer may explain a particular lonely scenario, it might not apply to another. To provide a unified interpretation, I work my way toward a solution that can explain loneliness in multiple situations. Specifically, I aim to demonstrate how the social environment acts as an antecedent to self-alienation and how the first two perspectives complement each other. Therefore, I begin by considering the social perspective of loneliness before applying the individualist perspective. Then, drawing on the first two perspectives, I further elaborate on how the recognition perspective integrates the social and individualist perspectives of loneliness and thereby offers the most exhaustive model. I also consider the shortcomings of this perspective, such as not distinguishing different forms of recognition, at the end of this chapter.

Organizational Loneliness and the Lack of Community

According to the social perspective of loneliness, loneliness arises when the individual perceives herself to be without peer support. For example, many of my research participants describe workplace loneliness as "not belonging" or "lacking a sense of togetherness" at work, either by not fitting in or being the target of bullying and denigration. These people see themselves as relative outsiders to their group and appear to lack social support at work. Although a few participants describe workplace loneliness as emerging from an unfulfilled desire for friendship and love, most seem to desire a sense of group belonging. As anticipated, this suggests that Weiss's (1973) concepts of social loneliness and emotional loneliness do not adequately explain workplace loneliness. To reiterate, emotional loneliness refers to an unfulfilled desire for emotional intimacy (e.g., with a partner or parent/child), whereas social loneliness typically stems from an unfulfilled desire for friendship (see Weiss, 1973).

In the context of work, social loneliness may seem the most applicable of the two. However, it is not a perfect match as it is unclear what Weiss (1973) means by social. Is he referring to people's need for friendship or their need for belonging and community? Both are arguably important to people's emotional well-being, but they are not necessarily the same. While Weiss (1973) does consider that missing collegial relationships or community may cause loneliness (p. 17-18), he emphasizes the "lack of friendship" as the primary source of social loneliness (p. 25). This shortcoming is problematic for Weiss's theory, especially since he argues that social loneliness and emotional loneliness are caused by distinct deficits, yet he combines different emotional and social needs (and interactions) into these two categories.[115] As this has substantial implications for understanding workplace loneliness, I need to extend Weiss's (1973) typology. Through this activity, I also arrive at the first answer to why people feel lonely at work.

First, to further distinguish social loneliness from emotional loneliness, I argue that emotional intimacy tends to involve a relationship of dependency while friendship naturally does not. For example, a child is often psychologically and materially dependent on her parent, and two partners may be economically and legally interdependent. Although this dependency can create a strong bond, it may also inhibit more frank and transparent social exchanges, as these kinds of relationships are often asymmetrical and functional. Friendship, on the other hand, may be described as a "pure relationship" (borrowing Giddens's (1992) term) that is

[115] For example, the umbrella term "emotional loneliness" includes the desire for erotic love, romantic love, and platonic love, all belong.

symmetrical and without functional dependency (see also Nietzsche, 1954/2005; Derrida, 1993). From this perspective, friendship only exists as long as both partners desire it, but this also means that it is more fleeting and fragile than other forms of social ties as there are fewer forces binding two actors together. For example, while friendships may be terminated based on a simple dispute, two colleagues will remain colleagues even if they do not like each other (for better or worse). Friendship, therefore, has a lower threshold and commitment, but the relationship is also more vulnerable. Hence, friendship-oriented relationships do not necessarily offer the individual a sense of "social safety." Nevertheless, most people desire friendship; when missing, they experience a kind of social pain that can be referred to as social loneliness.

People also desire to belong to a group (Allen, 2020). This does not mean that we naturally desire emotional intimacy with many people, but most of us arguably want to feel like we belong somewhere. If this "need for belonging" is to be distinguished from the "need for friendship," it would possibly be that the former facilitates a more durable and continuous sense of social safety. Conversely, when the individual lacks a stable membership in a group or community or does not feel socially secure in her immediate social environment, she may experience another kind of loneliness. This kind of loneliness could emerge even if the individual has an adequate number of friendship-oriented relationships. Putnam (2001) associates this "need for community" with generalized trust and reciprocity: an informal yet mutual agreement that the individual will not be abandoned and that she will share the spoils and be taken care of when she gets sick. This view is also held by Buber (1942/2005) and Slater (1970/2006) (see Chapter 3). According to this perspective, the individual may experience a kind of "community loneliness" if a basic feeling of social safety is missing, which is also what most of the participants seem to associate with workplace loneliness.

When I integrate the empirical material with the social perspective of loneliness, it appears that workplace loneliness can emerge when the individual perceives herself as a relative outsider to her group of colleagues. This typically occurs when a person thinks that other colleagues are more integrated, have more things in common, and spend more time together. This situation is potentially painful because the individual (consciously or subconsciously) anticipates that she will not be prioritized by the group and therefore is vulnerable and might even be abandoned (see also Cacioppo, 2009). That said, it is important to note that the deciding factor is not necessarily an "objective social safety" but the individual's subjective perception of her social situation. This builds on Weiss's (1973) idea of subjective social isolation. According to Putnam (2001), subjective social isolation has various consequences on a structural level, such as declining intelligence, health, and wealth in society. This suggests that social belonging is possibly essential for individuals to act constructively toward their own needs and the needs of others.

This community loneliness, therefore, has far-reaching consequences not only for the individual but also for the organization.

Another evident pattern in my empirical material is that many of the participants associate workplace loneliness with their individual function, performance, and status in the group. In other words, whether a person experiences a lack of community (or community loneliness) may depend on how valuable her contribution to the group is. This suggests that a person who perceives her role as meaningless or of low status is more likely to feel lonely at work. Again, according to the perspective at hand, this is because the individual evaluates her situation as socially precarious because the group does not depend on her. In this light, "community loneliness" could be seen as a hybrid between Weiss's (1973) emotional and social loneliness as it involves both intersubjective symmetricity and interdependence. In other words, to keep workplace loneliness at bay, the individual must feel both that she belongs and that the group needs her. That is how she minimizes the threat of abandonment and maximizes the chances that the group will come to her aid when she needs it. From this perspective, loneliness (as the fear of abandonment) pushes people to both conform and perform to increase a sense of social safety. Consequently, this model offers a functional view of workplace loneliness that has tremendous implications for management literature concerned with the role (and the exploitation of) emotions in the workplace. That is, if loneliness has a normative and performative dimension, organizations may have the incentive to operationalize it. Although I think "community loneliness" is an appropriate term for the phenomenon at hand: to address my research problem and emphasize the coordinating capacity of this kind of loneliness, I refer, from this point on, to "community loneliness" as organizational loneliness.[116] With this extended typology, Weiss's (1973) social loneliness can be left untouched to represent an unfulfilled desire for friendship. To be clear, I am not making workplace loneliness synonymous with organizational loneliness. In fact, I think that all kinds of loneliness can emerge in the workplace, although organizational loneliness seems to be the most prevalent, based on my empirical material. Neither am I making any claim that the three types differ in experience (or physiology). This is primarily a conceptual distinction that enables the investigation of different antecedents to loneliness.

With this conceptualization, I arrive at the first answer(s) to why people experience loneliness in the workplace. In summary: my empirical material can be interpreted to suggest that organizational loneliness emerges when the individual lacks a sense of community and/or interprets her position in the organization as insecure. This feeling is mediated by a situation of low status and unimportant function in the

[116] Others have referred to this as "collective loneliness" (Cacioppo et al., 2015; Murthy, 2020), although this is not an established term, and it makes it sound as if the collective is lonely (i.e., Riesman's (1950/2001) loneliness crowd), which is not the intent.

organization. With this perspective, the high level of workplace loneliness could be explained by the observation that work has become increasingly precarious over the past two decades, including a surge of short-term contracts and job-hopping and the decline of the traditional office (e.g., see Standing, 2011). When people see work as a short-term commitment, they might be less inclined to invest in social ties in the workplace, which could reinforce a cycle of workers feeling increasingly socially alienated. This sentiment is expressed by a few of the participants and is something I sympathize with as a doctoral student on a fixed-term contract (albeit arguably not short term).

Although this this change might make workplace relationships more superficial and brief, it could also have a positive effect by freeing up social and emotional energy that may be spent elsewhere. However, this presupposes that there are other arenas where the individual can establish meaningful and durable relationships. As Putnam (2001) argues, communal life in the western world has notably declined over the past decades. Today, work is the only form of group membership many people have (outside of family). The high mobility in the job market is another double-edged sword here. While it allows people to escape unfavorable social situations at work (and find a place where they belong), it perhaps makes them less likely to stay and sort out social issues. Among other things, this could lead to a decline in social and conflict management skills, which might inhibit a sense of community in the long run. In addition, people might be willing to take on more demanding roles and work personas on a short-term basis. Although this is potentially necessary to partake in a competitive job market, it could also lead to increased opportunism and individualism (Standing, 2011: 4). Here, Standing (2011) notes that when work becomes increasingly individualized and precarious, risks are transferred from the employer to the individual, which can lead to increased performance anxiety, self-criticism, and loneliness (ibid: 22–25).

In the end, the social perspective poses timely and ethical concerns for organizations by pointing to the link between a lack of community and loneliness. As noted, from this perspective, the pain of loneliness exists to protect the individual from helplessness by pushing her to secure social aid. In other words, she will experience loneliness if she perceives herself to be without social support. However, as visible in the empirical material, the individual might as well respond to loneliness by withdrawing from or even repelling the collective. This is a situation that the social perspective is unable to address. In addition, the social perspective is somewhat of a "naturalist" approach, as it aligns with the idea that loneliness fulfills an evolutionary social function (e.g., Cacioppo, 2009). Historically, this makes sense, as abandonment was potentially a death sentence for our ancestors. Today, however, there is little to no physical danger in being socially

isolated, and it is questionable how applicable this model is.[117] Therefore, this conclusion is somewhat simplistic as it only addresses the individual's basic material needs and safety, which is arguably not enough to understand existential suffering, such as anxiety and loneliness, in contemporary society. In addition, this model makes loneliness a precursor to aloneness and distracts us from the fact that some people feel lonely even though they are perfectly integrated, while others do not feel lonely despite being completely isolated (and abandoned). Therefore, I am not satisfied with this answer to why (workplace) loneliness is experienced, as it only offers one piece of the puzzle to my bilateral theoretical and empirical material. To arrive at a more comprehensive answer, I now turn to the idea that loneliness stems from the self-alienating aspects of togetherness.

External Demands and the Lack of Autonomy

The second perspective in my theoretical framework (or rather the first) is seeing loneliness as a product (and source) of self-alienation. This perspective suggests that loneliness comes about when there is a discrepancy between a person's inner self and manifested self (see Eddy, 1961; Moore, 1976). For example, a few participants describe that loneliness made them do things that they otherwise would not have done. As noted in the previous section, this points to loneliness having a normative dimension. However, whether this "submissive" behavior precedes loneliness or is a manifestation of it is difficult to say; even the philosophers discussed in Chapter 3 disagree on this matter (e.g., Riesman, 1950/2001; Moustakas, 1961/2016). What can be said, however, is that loneliness potentially has a bidirectional relationship with conformity. This conformity, in turn, can be understood as a kind of self-alienation, as the individual forfeits a part of herself to fit into the group. This situation appears in my empirical material too: multiple participants describe loneliness as self-abandonment, which is in line with Arendt's (1978) sentiment that a person who cannot keep herself company is lonely no matter how rich her social life. So, according to the individualist perspective, someone who over-conforms to external demands will inevitably be lonely (cf. Riesman, 1950/2001). In other words, any endeavor to avoid loneliness by modifying oneself to receive approval can lead to more loneliness (Moustakas, 1961/2016; Mijuskovic, 2012). This view explains why some participants respond to loneliness by withdrawing and repelling others rather than seeking reintegration. These individuals, consciously or subconsciously, escape further self-alienation by turning away from the group (pressure). In short, according to this perspective, it is better to be your own company than to be in the company of people who expect you to surrender yourself.

[117] On the other hand, abandonment in an organizational context could be associated with termination and a loss of necessary income. Therefore, this perspective might still hold some relevance today.

This observation suggests that the fear of loneliness (and the fear of social isolation) may put people at a greater risk of self-abandonment. Put differently, there is potentially a tradeoff between social safety and self-expression: people suppress (unethical)[118] aspects of their personalities to minimize the risk of rejection. In the workplace, this can manifest as a professional façade, which is ethical but can also leave a person feeling inauthentic. This also means that the individual potentially compromises her own strength and independence (i.e., self-efficacy) to fit in and be accepted by the group, which makes her more vulnerable in case of social isolation. Here, the social and individualist perspectives of loneliness intersect. That is, it is seemingly impossible for the individual to maximize both her autonomy and connection (social support) as the pursuit of one may impede the other. However, the tradeoff is not necessarily a problem. What is interesting is how organizations intercept this tradeoff by bringing people together while also keeping them apart. By doing so, people's desire for both connection and autonomy may be denied, which could explain why togetherness is sometimes perceived as burdensome.

To understand workplace loneliness from the individualist perspective, it becomes relevant to consider how organizations both unite and divide their members. My theoretical and empirical material reveal a few patterns. First, previous research argues that workplace loneliness can be reduced by hiring "culture-fit" employees. This idea suggests that organizational culture has a relationship with workplace loneliness. Second, because physical space brings people together, this facilitates a sense of belonging (Jaitli & Hua, 2013). However, some participants seem to prefer physical isolation over working from the office. Considering the relationship between physical space and workplace loneliness is, therefore, also relevant. Third, specialization (or division of labor), a topic evident in both my theoretical and empirical material, could mediate professional identity and potentially reduce loneliness (Wang & Liu, 2020), but far-reaching division of labor could also be socially (and self-) alienating (see Durkheim, 1897/2002)[119]. Fourth, hierarchy seems to have a clear relationship with workplace loneliness: virtually all my material points to not only leaders feeling lonely but also many workers feeling lonely in the vicinity of their bosses. Fifth, formality and politeness are common phenomena in the workplace that are also problematic from the individualist perspective, as they imply that the individual restricts her self-expression (and emotions) to adhere to external expectations. These five organizational aspects and

[118] In other words, aspects that are undesirable by others.

[119] Durkheim (1897/2002) argues that while division of labor can be beneficial to both individuals and societies, division of labor is a separating force unless people are united through an equally strong morality (p. 178). Durkheim believes that division of labor has progressed to far and rapidly in modern societies, and that it no longer serves the happiness the people (p. 186, 289). To illustrate this concern, he contrasted human society with an organism: in the organism, each organ fulfills a unique role without competing with other organs. Meanwhile, in human societies, individuals occupy specialized roles but take advantage of their interdependence for personal gain (pp. 290-293).

practices will be considered next in the context of workplace loneliness. However, to achieve this, it will be necessary to introduce some additional literature, although this literature will only fulfill a describing purpose.

Organizational Culture

First, organizational culture (or corporate culture), as a social glue, is typically understood as the shared values and norms in a group (see Kotter & Heskett, 2011: 4). Organizational cultures, from one perspective, exist to guide members on how things are meant to be done in a workplace (Kreps, 1990: 224). In other words, culture defines a member of the informal organization (Kunda, 1991: 3), drawing the line between who is an insider and who is not. Like tribes, organizational cultures tend to prefer homogeneity and repel those who do not fit in (ibid: 15). Therefore, the individual is expected to adopt social and cultural norms to be considered a member of the group. This perspective not only addresses the normative dimension of belonging (and loneliness) but also points to how organizations may have an incentive to shape culture, making it inclusive but not too forgiving. By doing this, organizations might be able to override norms that people bring with them from the outside (and have within themselves) and direct people's desire to be culture fit toward organizational performance. Although there is a power to be harnessed here, it can be burdensome and self-alienating when corporate culture is too encompassing and demanding. That is, the individual may want to disassociate herself from the immediate social culture to escape peer pressure and other informal demands. One of my interviewees (IP1) notes that his organization actively fosters a "macho culture" by hosting parties and encouraging alcohol consumption. As he does not identify with this lifestyle, he felt misplaced and lonely and eventually chose to quit his job. However, as noted, not all people can withdraw from the workplace culture (either by resigning or seeking isolation) and may instead feel trapped in a social environment where they do not fit in. This leads me to the second relevant aspect of work: physical space.

Physical Space

Where peer pressure operates, peer surveillance naturally follows. This is enabled by bringing people together in the same physical space, for example, in open landscape offices, where workers are always surrounded by others. This means that a person's every move is visible and scrutinized by both peers and superiors as an individual has nowhere to hide. Now, the individual's relation to surveillance is arguably twofold: she wants her ethical behavior and qualities to be noticed, while preferring to keep her less-desirable traits hidden. Constant surveillance demands the individual to be her best throughout the workday, which can be exhausting and self-alienating, producing feelings of shame and a desire for withdrawal (Orr, 2003). This reaction to constant surveillance is visible in Hill's (1992/2003) study of managers who coped with workplace loneliness (and other forms of stress) by

isolating themselves. Similarly, researchers have found that open landscape offices can reduce face-to-face interaction by as much as 70% as they trigger people's natural human response to withdraw socially (Bernstein & Turban, 2018: 1). Not providing workers with a physical and emotional safe space where they can, at least momentarily, suspend any persona or façade and exhale could make people more vulnerable to workplace loneliness. Moreover, as noted in my empirical material, when people cannot relieve the pain of loneliness by either reintegration or withdrawal, some people may develop antipathies toward colleagues and contribute to a hostile social environment. According to the individualist perspective, having the opportunity to be alone is fundamental to maintaining a healthy self-relation, which seems to be a prerequisite to forming positive relationships with others.

Specialization

Third, division of labor, or specialization, is a recurring theme in my theoretical and empirical material (e.g., Durkheim, 1893/2014; Honneth, 1992). Division of labor is arguably primarily a concern for the social perspective of loneliness, suggesting that specialized work might increase the appetite for more autonomous and individualized work (including rewards), potentially reducing empathy and increasing hostility between colleagues in the long term (see Slater, 1970/2006). But far-reaching specialization also has implications for the individualist perspective: when people are designated a narrow and predefined role, they may feel limited in their ability and power and experience a lack of autonomy. For example, in Vignette 2, a school counselor associates loneliness with feelings of powerlessness and disconnection from (and inferiority to) the school psychologist. Similarly, a few other participants lament over not having any colleagues with whom they share responsibilities. In addition, far-reaching division of labor could make relationships at work increasingly functional. In other words, colleagues interact with each other due to their interdependence and necessity rather than personal desire. On this note, Durkheim (1893/2014) argues that "the division of labor [specialization] unites at the same time as it sets at odds; it causes the activities that it differentiates to converge; it brings closer those that it separates" (p. 215). This view is in line with the theme of this section. Although specialization may be necessary as a social system (organization) grows, it can also inhibit both community and autonomous self-expression, which could manifest as loneliness. From this perspective, unfavorable organizational culture and physical space might be mediators of loneliness, but the problem possibly starts with the work itself. However, slicing work and responsibilities in a way that balances individual autonomy and collaboration may be a challenging tightrope to walk.

Hierarchy

The fourth dividing organizational phenomenon is hierarchy, whose relationship to loneliness is undeniable. My theoretical and empirical material as well as previous

workplace loneliness research suggest that it is lonely at the top. On this note, my empirical material shows that some people even construct loneliness as a sign of great leadership. This emphasizes how intertwined the two potentially are. Although the social perspective frames loneliness as a warning signal against abandonment, loneliness in leaders demands a more complex model. Because, while authority implies a power distance that could inhibit friendship and emotional intimacy (e.g., Nietzsche, 1954/2005; Derrida, 1993), leaders also have a high formal status that can foster a robust professional identify and feelings of social safety. From this perspective, leaders are not at significant risk of being abandoned by the group (except perhaps where mutiny is possible), yet they still often feel lonely. That is, loneliness in leaders is more likely due to something else, possibly emotional detachment and "peerlessness." In other words, the leader is not part of the group under the same conditions as the rest of the members: her power makes her an outsider (cf. Hill, 1992/2003).

On the other hand, another possible source of loneliness in leaders could be feelings of inauthenticity and self-alienation due to managing appearance, a possibility seen in my theoretical and empirical material as well: many leaders commit to acting as role models and regulating their own emotions. Here, my thesis overlaps with both Hochschild's (1979/2012) critique of emotional labor and Costas's (2009) concern for self-alienation in management consultants. That is, leaders carry a heavy emotional workload but is unable to draw emotional support from their subordinates as that would potentially compromise the leadership act. At the same time, a leader cannot withdraw from the social environment entirely and might feel trapped. This can be emotionally exhausting and produce feelings of social alienation and self-alienation, resulting in loneliness. In the meantime, it has been noted that people are more likely to feel lonely when interacting with their bosses (Anand & Mishra, 2021). A potential explanation is that interacting with someone who is perceived as more successful and influential in the organization can give rise to feelings of relative insignificance. This situation is addressed from the social perspective of loneliness in the previous section. Moreover, another possible explanation is that people may be more likely to hide aspects of themselves when interacting with their boss(es), which may inhibit a more intimate relationship. From this perspective, hierarchical relationships are inherently alienating as they put pressure on both actors to modify or constrain themselves.

Formality

Finally, all of the above are potentially exacerbated by the demand for formality in the workplace. This includes policies such as dress code, corporate jargon, and courtesy. In this context, formality and politeness can be understood as emotional management in its purest form and have been described as "the organizational control over the individual" (Hall, 1996: 65). The potentially harmful effects of this

on emotions in organizations have been voiced long before workplace emotion research became popular. Weber (1922/2013), for example, argues that the (bureaucratic) organization is perfected the more it is dehumanized (p. 975), and Merton (1940) notes that formality is deployed to "minimize friction by largely restricting (official) contact to modes which are previously defined by the rules of the organizations" (p. 560). According to this view, formality creates predictability by modulating individuals and relationships in the workplace. This predictability via formality enables people who otherwise would not like each other to cooperate, but it also keeps people who might have developed a more intimate relationship apart. Weber (1905/2014) called this rationalization of life "the iron cage" that traps individuals in emotionless states. In other words, formality (and bureaucracy) establishes a fair organization but potentially inhibits natural group and identity processes (see du Gay, 2000: 2), which may lead to frustration, alienation, and loneliness.

This was visible in the empirical material. For example, some participants described workplace loneliness as feelings of social meaninglessness and relational shallowness at work. At the same time, it is questionable whether a workplace without any element of imposed formality could operate effectively unless people are trained to deal with social conflicts productively. However, people accustomed to formal and polite social interactions are likely unequipped to navigate tough social conflicts. That is, formality and politeness could help normalize social interactions at work, for better or worse. On the other hand, Costas (2012) notes that management sometimes instrumentalizes friendship and emotional intimacy at work as a means of organizational control. Although this appears to be the opposite of formality (as seen in bureaucratic organizations), it is arguably another manifestation of the same phenomenon and may have the same side effects. For example, one research participant (IP3) explains that her workplace loneliness is rooted in people giving her mixed messages – i.e., pretending to be her friend but often letting her down or outright betraying her. But this could also be a culture-personality conflict: perhaps some people prefer to work in a dehumanized and unemotional workplace, while others prefer a friendly and intimate atmosphere, even if it is fabricated. On this note, it is questionable how many people would thrive in a workplace that is entirely unrestricted, as natural group and identity processes may inevitably lead to conflict, inequality, and discrimination. I elaborate on this in the next chapter.

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In summary, organizations operate by moderating not only human relationships but also individuals' identities and values within the workplace. Invoking the individualist perspective here provides another answer to the why of workplace loneliness: some people are lonely at work because the organization does not leave

them alone, physically and emotionally. In other words, the organization more or less suffocates the individual. Understandably, many people do not appreciate when they feel pressured to modify themselves both by formal and informal demands. According to the perspective at hand, this deprives people of self-expression, existential freedom, and the opportunity to establish genuine relationships with others as well as with themselves. A lack of these qualities at work is arguably a concern for both the social and individualist perspectives. However, whereas the social perspective suggests that loneliness vanishes when people take care of each other, the individualist perspective proposes that a person can also avoid loneliness by taking proper care of herself and investing in her own autonomy (e.g., Riesman, 1950/2001). This view implies that loneliness is about a sense of safety, either by having peer support or individual strength and independence (self-efficacy). This understanding aligns with Buber's (1942/2005) argument that both excessive individualist and collectivist tendencies are manifestations of loneliness. Once again, the tradeoff between connection and autonomy becomes apparent, and it seems that maintaining a healthy balance between the two can be difficult. Moreover, the idea that loneliness is related to helplessness is backed by research that suggests that people who suffer from sickness or old age are more likely to feel lonely (Hughes et al., 2010; Davidson & Rossall, 2015). However, what is important is not measurable individual strength or peer support but whether the individual has a durable idea of herself as either self-sufficient or protected by the group. Drawing on this, if loneliness is a cry for social help according to the social perspective, the individualist perspective frames loneliness as the cry of an injured self-image (i.e., a pessimistic perception of self-efficacy).

Furthermore, integrating the social and individualist perspectives suggests that the social environment not only provides the individual with sustenance for a positive self-image but can also injure her self-relation. Put differently, a person who does not feel naturally secure in a demanding social environment is at greater risk of abandoning herself by over-conforming. This further explains why some people choose withdrawal over reintegration and try to reconstruct loneliness into a positive experience that fuels feelings of strength and pride instead of breaking down a person's self-confidence. By considering the social and individualist perspectives together, I have arrived at a more nuanced answer to why people feel lonely at work – a model that points to the tension between connection and autonomy and that the organizational practice of bringing people together while also keeping them apart can set this out of balance. By invoking the social and individualist perspectives, a lot has been said about why people experience workplace loneliness, but much more remains. Here, recognition theories, along with some additional conceptual work, may further flesh out this bilateral model of workplace loneliness.

Unfulfilled Recognition at Work

The third and final perspective of my theoretical framework is based on sociological recognition theory. Unlike the first two perspectives, where I collected analogous ideas from a wide range of literature (e.g., social psychology, political theory, and existentialist philosophy), the recognition perspective is more theoretically compact. Specifically, I have leaned on the works of Honneth (1992) and Fukuyama (1992). To reiterate, both Honneth and Fukuyama believe intersubjective recognition is fundamental to a person's self-esteem and that people's desire for self-worth pushes them to seek out the recognition they think they deserve. In Chapter 3, I loosely proposed that loneliness could be understood as the emotional response to denied or absent recognition. In this section, I will elaborate on this position by integrating all my material and outlining a "recognition theory of workplace loneliness." As a part of this endeavor, I will begin by reconsidering my conceptualization of loneliness (as an emotion) to see how it is best consolidated with the recognition perspective. Through all of this, I will formulate yet another answer to why people experience loneliness at work.

A Passion for Recognition?

My conceptual point of departure for this thesis was to frame loneliness as an "abstract emotion." This decision was based on previous workplace loneliness research (e.g., Wright & Silard, 2021). However, I have also acknowledged that "emotion" is a concept in crisis (see Dixon, 2012): some scholars approach it as intense feelings that belong to the "heart and soul," while others define it as a kind of body language (cf. Bolton, 2004). This conflict is referred to as the "emotion paradox" (Barrett, 2006b) and has arguably led to a divide in workplace emotion literature between studying the experienced and the expressed dimensions of emotion. The challenge, then, is how my study fits into this body of research as loneliness seemingly lacks a communicative element. In other words, does loneliness being a "silent" phenomenon automatically put me in the "experienced" camp, even though I am also interested in how loneliness manifests cognitively, behaviorally, as well as organizationally? Arguably not, but to clarify this, I need to re-evaluate my view of loneliness in the light of the theoretical and empirical progress I have made since Chapter 1.

First, my research participants' descriptions deal with a wide range of experiences and feelings. Although many of these may be considered emotional in origin, it would be unreasonable to call them all emotions as that would dilute the concept significantly. Loneliness might be a gray-zone, as some scholars confidently refer to it as an emotion. However, an equal number of scholars have advised against this conceptualization or have not considered loneliness a (discrete) emotion. Adjusting my position here, I am inclined to agree with those who argue that emotions need some distinct social expression (such as facial or sound) to be categorized as such.

From this perspective, mere experiences, feelings, and moods are not to be defined as emotions, even if these can also manifest behaviorally. That said, it should be made clear that I have no authority to define "emotion"; I am only trying to position myself (and loneliness) between existing perspectives. What makes loneliness more complicated here is that my theoretical and empirical material emphasizes that loneliness is also not just a feeling: loneliness can manifest subconsciously like other emotions. Therefore, I am personally not against the notion of viewing loneliness as an abstract or complex emotion (e.g., Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2005), although I question what value such a model brings. At the same time, I am not attracted to the Darwinist explanation, which often comes with conceptualizing loneliness as a social pain. To flesh out my understanding of loneliness, I take another route.

Tracing the roots of the emotional perspective in Chapter 1, I noted that some of the phenomena that are referred to as emotions today have been described as appetites and passions in the past (Dixon, 2003; see also Descartes, 1649/2017). Today, passions are typically associated with virtuous and selfless desires (such as love),[120] but this deviates from its original purpose. The term "passion" derives from the Latin *pati*, which means to endure/experience, and the Late Latin *passionem*, which means suffering (see Etymonline.com: passion, 2021). Thus, passion can be better understood as a kind of suffering that is acted upon (ibid).[121] In other words, passion is a (painful) desire that motivates the individual to direct her energy. However, if the individual fails to do so constructively, the pain of a passion may just as well be suffered and endured (as implied in the Passion of Christ). From this perspective, passions are emotional experiences–i.e., desires or yearnings for something–that push the individual to fill a void within her. Depending on how successful the individual is, this may produce all kinds of emotions (e.g., happiness, anger, sadness, and shame) that make the individual's internal state public (see Barbalet, 1998: 111).

Although emotions are typically defined as brief and intense affective episodes (Verduyn et al., 2009), passions may be understood as more continuous or even constant (although fluctuating in intensity). This resonates with my empirical material where participants described loneliness as an enduring "gnawing frustration" or "bubbling sensation." Considering this, loneliness could be approached as a kind of passion instead of emotion. As with emotion, passions can be analyzed from a constructivist perspective by investigating what feelings,

[120] Today, we also use the word "passion" loosely to indicate that we are excited about something such as a hobby or work. Arguably, this is the same as saying that an activity or object evokes desirable feelings and that we are emotionally dependent on it.

[121] The *Century Dictionary* similarly describes passions as something that enslaves the individual, i.e., makes him act involuntarily, unlike affection where the individual is still in control (see *Century Dictionary*: passions).

thoughts, and behavior people associate with a particular desire. This is what I have done in my empirical project. But if loneliness is a passion, the question is: A passion for what? Although the answer to this should already be clear, I will reflect on a couple of alternatives. First, in Chapter 2, I acknowledge the potential link between loneliness and belongingness. There, I note that belonging implies a "longing to be" a part of something (see Filstad et al., 2019: 117) and suggest that loneliness could be understood as the "absence of belonging." I also emphasize that belonging has been conceptualized as the process of being accepted by the group (Hagerty et al., 1992). From this perspective, belongingness seems to be an appetite for connection, similar to Fukuyama's (1992) thumos. Drawing on this, it could be proposed that if loneliness is a social hunger (see Cacioppo, 2009), belongingness is the corresponding appetite. Alternatively, if loneliness is a social pain, belonging may be considered a social pleasure. Although these distinctions are aesthetically appealing, I do not think they are very helpful. A more functional separation would add to the understanding of both loneliness and belongingness.

Instead, returning to the literature on workplace belonging, belonging seems to be largely about perceived commonality (Filstad et al., 2019; Montoya et al., 2008). Here, cultural and idiosyncratic properties influence both individual and group categorization processes (Tajfel, 1974; Ashforth & Mael, 1989), but the individual also takes in the environment in her evaluation of whether she fits in (Filstad et al., 2019; Jaitli & Hua, 2013).[122] From this perspective, belonging is about familiarity and sameness as well as about acceptance and inclusion. Although much of my empirical material aligns with this view, it does not account for everything. As noted, the theoretical and empirical material suggests that loneliness is not only a desire for connection but also for individuality. The differentiating factor here appears to be the link between loneliness and low self-esteem. That is, although belonging may be a source of (experienced) social safety, it does not automatically provide the individual with self-worth.[123] For example, a coin belongs in the wallet, but it is not necessarily considered valuable. In other words, to keep loneliness at bay, it is not enough to belong; people also want to feel like valued individuals.[124]

[122] For example, as a Swedish person, Swedish architecture resonates with me because it if familiar. When I walk in a Swedish city, I am more likely to feel like I am at home – that I belong.

[123] That said, this is largely a conceptual distinction, as belonging might just as well be defined to include a dimension of "feeling valuable."

[124] In this context, it is also relevant what kind of loneliness we are talking about. For example, it is possible that Weiss's (1973) emotional loneliness can be satisfied with just belonging (e.g., a child will not experience emotional loneliness as long as she senses belonging in her family even if she is inferior to her parents in terms of power and resources). On the other hand, social loneliness is arguably not dependent on sameness at all but rather with on being equals. As Camus, suggests (see footnote in Chapter 4), friendship implies a non-hierarchical relationship (pure relationship). Although sameness potentially facilitates this, it is arguably not necessary. In fact, dissimilarities could even nurture friendship, as it suggests that people are not competing for the same resources

This was evident in Vignette #3, where the individual belonged almost "too much" yet experienced loneliness. To make sense of this dialectic tension, the recognition perspective has much to offer. Because recognition theories point to this exact phenomenon: to feel recognized it is not enough to belong, the individual also needs to feel valued. This understanding strongly resonates with how loneliness has appeared in my theoretical and empirical material. In other words, loneliness emerges when the individual is unable to derive a sense of self-worth from her social environment.

To elaborate on what recognition implies in this context, it involves every aspect of intersubjective interaction – anything that tells the individual that someone (a group or another person) sees qualities in her (e.g., intellect, humor, empathy, and morality). This can be communicated through words (e.g., using the desired pronoun or shared jargon), body language (e.g., nodding, smiling, frowning, or laughing to validate someone else's experience or claim), and actions (e.g., gregariousness or standing up for someone). According to recognition theories, this kind of affirmation, approval, and validation is essential for an individual to establish a durable idea of herself as an intelligent, funny, compassionate, and ethical member of the group (see also Buber, 1954/2011; Sartre, 1946/2007). When the individual does not receive the kind of recognition she desires or expects, she may begin to doubt herself and her qualities. This was clearly visible in the empirical material and suggests that loneliness can be conceptualized as a "hunger" or strong desire (passion) for recognition. Regardless of whether this desire is satisfied, the fundamental need for recognition persists as an enduring fear of loneliness, a fear akin to the ever-present possibility of starvation.

Notably, this perspective frames loneliness as a dynamic process, suggesting that it can manifest with varying intensity and evolve over time. This is also what appeared to me when I reviewed the empirical material: people's first response to loneliness seems to be increased gregariousness and attempts for reintegration, but if this fails and loneliness intensifies, they often resort to withdrawal and even repulsion. Beyond this, the model at hand settles the difference (yet relationship) between aloneness and loneliness once and for all. To paraphrase Voltaire (1764/1824):[125] a person may struggle to establish a sense of pride (self-worth) when alone because there is no one around to recognize her qualities. Meanwhile, an individual who does not desire or expect recognition may momentarily enjoy

(although this is a quite Hobbesian perspective). However, none of these adequately address workplace loneliness, which is why I proposed "organizational loneliness." Here, organizational loneliness falls somewhere between social and emotional loneliness. It arguably depends on both sameness and equality, but not to the same extent as either of the other forms.

[125] The following quotation is attributed to Voltaire: "We are rarely proud when we are alone." This quotation is said to originate from the *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764), but there is no digital record of this. The closest recorded phrase that I could find is as follows: "We seldom get heated while reading in solitude; for our minds are then tranquil and sedate" (Voltaire, 1824: 170).

isolation (and experience solitude). However, she will arguably only do so if she knows that recognition is available to her whenever she desires it. Conversely, loneliness cannot be resolved by merely bringing people together; rather, it is temporarily alleviated when individuals receive the recognition that fosters a positive self-image.[126]

Moving forward, by applying the conceptual typology of loneliness to this model, it may be proposed that different "forms" of loneliness correspond to different modes of recognition (i.e., love, legal, and solidarity*;* see Honneth, 1992). Whereas Honneth's (1992) "love" largely overlaps with Weiss's (1973) emotional and social loneliness, I have made my case for why this mode is not essential to workplace loneliness.[127] That is, I have emphasized Honneth's (1992) "solidarity" and Fukuyama's (1992) "isothymia" as well as Rousseau's *amour propre* as modes of recognition that are relevant to understanding loneliness in the workplace. Using my empirical material to extend Weiss's model, I conceptualized organizational loneliness (or collective/community loneliness), which here corresponds with a passion for solidarity.

To reiterate, solidarity is experienced when the individual feels recognized both for her sameness with the group (i.e., belonging/connection) and her unique value (autonomy/individuality) (see Honneth, 1992). When either of these desires is denied (through nonrecognition or misrecognition), the individual is deprived of solidarity, and no level of recognition of the other kind can make up for this. In such a situation, a person may be unable to derive a sufficient amount of self-esteem from her social environment, and this low self-esteem can manifest as loneliness. On this note, my empirical material suggests that when an individual evaluates disrespect or nonrecognition to be justified, loneliness may be accompanied by sadness and shame. However, if the lonely experience/situation is deemed unfair, the individual might instead react with anger. This perspective addresses most, if not all, of my empirical material, where research participants described workplace loneliness as emerging from not being seen, heard, appreciated, invited, or accepted. It is, therefore, my ambition to now outline a recognition theory of workplace loneliness that can answer why people feel lonely at work as well as how it may manifest.

[126] This perspective also addresses why death and loss can cause feelings of loneliness: with the loss of a relationship, the individual loses the part of herself that emerged (or could have emerged) intersubjectively between her and the other person. In other words, the individual loses a (potential) source of self-respect and self-esteem, which is especially painful if she was invested in the relationship or if the kind of recognition cannot be replaced (e.g., parental love).

[127] To reiterate, I speculate that people are unlikely to experience emotional and social loneliness in the workplace because they do not expect to be recognized as lovable persons or close friends by their colleagues.

Outlining a Recognition Theory of Workplace Loneliness

In this section, I will analyze various facets of recognition and loneliness at work and address where they intersect and can explain each other. I will also discuss a few shortcomings of Honneth's theory that have severe implications for workplace loneliness. I will begin by discussing some general aspects of recognition and then move on to how recognition can answer the why of workplace loneliness specifically.

An essential aspect of intersubjective recognition in the context of my thesis is that while it is arguably a universal need, it also has a subjective and cultural dimension. Similarly, I have approached loneliness as both a universal and subjective phenomenon. Regarding the subjectivity of recognition, whether an individual will feel satisfied or perceive nonrecognition, misrecognition, or even disrespect, largely depends on the individual's expectations (both regarding type and amount). To elaborate, loneliness (as insufficient recognition) arguably only arises when there is a mismatch between expected and received (perceived) recognition. As individuals may have varying desires for recognition and cultural norms may influence the exchange of recognition, discrepancies can arise. In other words, loneliness is not a case of a measurable insufficient level of recognition but due to an unfulfilled desire (expectation) for recognition.[128] Equally important is the source of recognition. For example, a compliment from the wrong person or group may not be appreciated or even be perceived as offensive and disgusting.[129] Consequently, the individual must desire recognition from another subject who is ready to give her the kind of recognition she wants. On this note, most people also want their acts of recognition to be well-received. In other words, intersubjective recognition is bidirectional, and rejected recognition may be perceived as an act of disrespect. Therefore, a common basis of values (and culture) is potentially fundamental to effective intersubjective recognition; if not, individuals will not know how to receive and give appropriate recognition. In the workplace, this is not necessarily a problem, as employees typically adhere to the same corporate culture and social norms as long as these are communicated (or in other ways obvious). However, there are some implications of this that I will consider in a moment.

From another angle, disrespect and misrecognition only lead to loneliness if the individual desires recognition in the first place. As noted, this may be why emotional loneliness and social loneliness are uncommon in the workplace: people

[128] This could be why people who move to another country often feel socially alienated in the host country –i.e., they struggle to receive the kind of recognition they desire (due to having different cultural values).

[129] For example, being recognized as an equal in a group that the individual does not feel commonality (belonging) with can be frustrating. In such situations, the individual may try to repel the group's attempt to integrate her. This can explain some of the antisocial tendencies in my empirical material.

do not necessarily expect love and friendship from their colleagues, but many people do desire a sense of solidarity in the work group. This also means that a person who belongs to a group is more vulnerable to disrespect (or rather takes more damage from it). This was highlighted by Riesman (1950/2001) and reiterates the normative dimension of loneliness: a person who belongs to a group has more to lose from (intentionally or unintentionally) committing unethical behavior. This is essentially what Nietzsche (1886/1999: 106) recognizes and could explain why people sometimes prefer to be alone and independent than to feel vulnerable (or like relative outsiders) in a group. As evident in the empirical material, some people protect themselves from the pain or fear of rejection by rejecting the group first. This could be seen as an attempt to dismantle the desire for recognition from within and guard oneself against unfulfilled expectations.

Similarly, Arendt (1978) believes that the passion for recognition could be satisfied alone if the individual is capable of recognizing her own value, a sentiment that Nietzsche and Schopenhauer share (see Chapter 3) and resonates with the individualist perspective of loneliness. Therefore, the individual who is capable of self-recognition is free from the struggle of intersubjective recognition. This corresponds with Rousseau's other form of "self-love" (*amour de soi*), which does not depend on recognition from others (see Delaney, 2005). Rather, *amour de soi* is better understood as a kind of self-preservation and therefore is somewhat in conflict with *amour propre*, which demands conformity (ibid). By this, Rousseau reiterates people's bilateral need for connection and autonomy and suggests that self-love does not entirely depend on intersubjective recognition (although it may be argued that a basic *amour de soi* is fundamental to *amour propre* in the first place). That said, it is reasonable to believe that virtually all people need some level of intersubjective recognition, and that those who seem not to, have perhaps replaced the need for isothymia with megalothymia (as demonstrated by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, among others, in Chapter 3). These individuals are as much trapped in the struggle for recognition as anyone else, if not more, since megalothymia is an appetite that is difficult to satisfy. This was indirectly raised by Slater (1970/2006), who argues that individualism can be a vicious cycle that leads to peer-contempt and an inflated self-image. On the other hand, some people may be forced into this situation. For example, managers (bosses) often have their isothymia denied as the group recognizes the boss as both superior and an outsider at the same time. This situation arguably feeds megalothymia, as recognition of superiority and power may be the only kind of recognition the manager can get. This was noted by a couple of my research participants and is something I will elaborate upon in a moment.

Finally, to satisfy a desire for recognition, the individual must consider herself worthy of recognition. If this basic self-esteem (or self-respect) is missing, she may feel like a fraud and lonely despite having her expectations met (or even surpassed).

For example, a person may be popular yet still feel very lonely. As noted in both the empirical and theoretical material, this can happen if the individual manages appearance and over-conforms toward peer pressure. This also relates to the problem of hierarchy. That is, informal hierarchies can also separate people from each other and can cause emotional isolation. Such a situation might provide the popular individual with validation and approval but deprive her of feelings of intimacy and intrinsic value. As previously considered and visible in the empirical material, this could lead to performance anxiety and loneliness. Here, the link between (lack of) intimacy and loneliness comes into the light; some level of intimacy may be necessary for the individual to feel that her true self is being recognized and not just her appearance or the role she fulfills. Again, Costas's (2009) concerns for self-alienation become relevant to understanding workplace loneliness: Costas's research drew attention to how organizations potentially warp expectations through discourse and ethos (see also Costas, 2012). This is also what I touched upon through my review of various organizational mechanisms that bring people together while also keeping them apart (see previous section).

Although there are many strengths of sociological recognition theory when it comes to explaining workplace loneliness, this perspective also comes with a few limitations that have implications for my research. While this may be seen as a shortcoming, it is also an opportunity for me to extend the recognition perspective and explore yet another answer to why people feel lonely at work. To begin, a glaring weakness of Honneth's (as well as Fukuyama's) recognition theory is that he did not specifically define what recognition is (or looks like in practice). This poses a challenge for my thesis, especially considering my argument that concepts are made relevant by their boundaries. Yet, in line with Honneth (1992), I have approached recognition as every aspect of intersubjectivity (i.e., interaction between two subjects). This suggests that recognition can be any attention that communicates to another person that she exists and has value (both intrinsic and functional). This also translates to more complex social interactions such as praise, compliments, and shared jargon. However, such a broad approach to recognition arguably makes an analysis of why people experience workplace loneliness difficult because different kinds of attention, such as validation and approval, could have varying effects on the individual. I have noted this issue in my empirical material but have not been able to address it with the perspective at hand.

Now, exactly how a typology of recognition should be constructed is hard to say, but I do think there is value in making a few distinctions. First, when I speak of intersubjective recognition, I am referring to being recognized as a subject with intrinsic value. Examples of this are positive comments about personality, kindness, humor, ideas, and so on. In other words, this kind of recognition is not about appearance or function. Meanwhile, another form of recognition (as compatible with Honneth's perspective) is validation as a kind of formal recognition–i.e.,

appreciation for a job well done (or rather a desirable outcome achieved).[130] This can include praise, bonuses, and promotions. While validation feels good and feeds the ego, it is not an intersubjective form of recognition–i.e., it does not necessarily make people feel seen and valued for who they are, only for what they have accomplished. Therefore, validation is performance-based and conditional: the individual needs to continue to achieve things to receive more validation. In itself, this is not a problem, and validation is arguably important in the workplace to motivate people. However, there might be a tradeoff between validation and other forms of recognition: the former could distract people from their desire for solidarity and isothymia.

This potential tradeoff is visible in my empirical material. For example, one person (SU5) describes how she replaced an unfulfilled desire for peer recognition with formal validation. Meanwhile, in Vignette #3, the research participant explains that she felt lonely despite receiving praise from her manager. The first example shows that there is potentially a bidirectional relationship between loneliness and an increased appetite for validation. This can be explained by Fukuyama's (1992) idea that isothymia may be corrupted into (and replaced by) megalothymia. Inversely, this can also address the loneliness leaders experience: perhaps people who are prone to loneliness are more likely to pursue leadership roles (and high status). This idea is supported by the observation that loneliness is associated with performance anxiety (see Chapter 5). The latter example, on the other hand, suggests that validation is perhaps not a very lasting delight. In line with this, a recent large scale workplace survey by a HR specialist company found that almost half of workers perceive praise from their superiors as ingenuine and meaningless (O.C. Tanner, 2023). Meanwhile, intersubjective recognition from colleagues, in theory, provides the individual with a more durable sense of self-esteem and a positive relationship with oneself and others. Integrating these two viewpoints, I suggest that a person who experiences solidarity (while also, to some degree, fearing loneliness) is less likely to seek power and leadership responsibilities because such roles could alienate her from the group.

Through analysis, I have arrived at my final answer to why people feel lonely at work–an answer that explicitly addresses workplace loneliness. That is, workplaces that provide employees with too much validation and not enough intersubjective recognition are a breeding ground for loneliness. However, this is not a matter of maximizing two mutually exclusive resources. As suggested, merely providing employees with a high level of (formal) validation could deter colleagues from seeking recognition from each other. A possible explanation for this would be that acquiring validation is more straightforward in the workplace as well as associated

[130] This implies that validation is typically based on teleological ethics–i.e., the outcome matters, not the virtue of the action or the thought that precedes it.

with what people often want to get out of work (e.g., money and power). Another explanation is that individual validation potentially fosters individualism. Intersubjective recognition, on the other hand, is more ambiguous as well as comes with little extrinsic reward. As this kind of recognition fundamentally depends on mutual interaction between two subjects, it may counteract excessive individualistic tendencies. This not only explains why people experience workplace loneliness but also reveals a potential managerial scheme: loneliness (and people's need for recognition) could be exploited by operationalizing validation. By doing so, peers are potentially alienated from intersubjective recognition and become dependent on continuous formal validation to feel good about themselves. Operationalizing validation is arguably another way that organizations bring people together and keep them apart: it makes them competitors for formal validation which, in turn, could make them less likely to empathize with each other. Again, this is not to say that validation is a bad thing in organizations. On the contrary, praise and bonuses are arguably fundamental for people to feel proud and satisfied with their work. The argument here is that a poor balance between formal praise and peer recognition could lead to a negative spiral.

In line with this, one of my research participants describes her colleagues as unworthy of her emotional energy. Similarly, the phrase "your colleagues are not your friends" is a common mantra online and results in more than 250 million[131] hits on a Google search, including memes (cultural images), videos, social media conversations, and articles. A prevalent view seems to be that collegial relationships are often characterized by a high degree of affective distance. The question then is, how could organizations achieve a healthy balance between validation and intersubjective recognition and foster empathy between colleagues? But at the same time, why would organizations want to do this? A pessimistic perspective is that organizations have the incentive to keep people hooked, like a drug, on formal praise and bonuses. On the other hand, keeping employees happy and healthy is arguably fundamental to attracting and retaining talent. These questions have implications for (critical) workplace emotion literature. Although these questions are out of the scope of my thesis, I will briefly address them in the forthcoming discussion.

What I am outlining here may be understood as a recognition theory of loneliness. Such a perspective not only addresses why people experience (workplace) loneliness but also points to how organizations may have the incentive to manage loneliness. In short, the passion for recognition potentially drives people to conform and perform in hopes of receiving recognition (or validation) and avoiding loneliness. However, as noted, this is also where it can go awry as megalothymia, a desire to be recognized as superior, may replace isothymia (see Fukuyama, 1992).

[131] This refers to number of hits without the quotation marks. The exact phrase returns 8500 hits.

To understand this process, the organizational aspect is fundamental. As suggested in the previous section, various organizational mechanisms and practices may have a bidirectional relationship with loneliness. In other words, they not only contribute to loneliness but also may, to some extent, depend on people's capacity to feel lonely. This is also what Arendt (1951/1976) was concerned with: loneliness can be operationalized by bringing people together while also keeping them apart, effectively denying both the desire for connection and autonomy (i.e., solidarity). In this light, loneliness becomes a catalyst for social control. Although this is an extreme proposition and might stretch the concept too far, it still warrants consideration when reflecting on the role of loneliness in organizations in the next chapter.

Summary

In this chapter, I have explored three answers to why people experience (workplace) loneliness by examining three different theoretical perspectives. First, the social perspective of loneliness suggests that loneliness serves as a defense mechanism against social isolation. In this context, people experience workplace loneliness because they do not feel like secure members of the organization or work group. The individualist perspective, on the other hand, frames loneliness as a cry of a wounded self-image, implying that loneliness arises when an individual feels suffocated by organizational demands and peer pressure. Finally, the recognition perspective integrates these two views and proposes that loneliness emerges from an unfulfilled desire for recognition, leading me to conceptualize loneliness as a passion for recognition. From this standpoint, loneliness (and the fear of loneliness) drives people to seek intersubjective recognition to establish a positive self-relation. In the case of workplace loneliness, I have emphasized the lack of solidarity (as a mode of recognition) and self-esteem (as self-worth) as potential predictors of organizational loneliness.

With this model, I sought to explain why loneliness emerges in various situations (e.g., alone, in groups, and among leaders). Furthermore, I highlighted that different forms of recognition could have distinct effects on individuals and their relationships with others. Specifically, I suggested that formal validation could overshadow people's desire for intersubjective recognition (i.e., solidarity and isothymia), leading to megalothymia (a desire for power and superiority). Here, it may be speculated that workplaces often provide employees with a substantial amount of validation (e.g., praise and bonuses) but not as much intersubjective recognition. In other words, people may feel rewarded for their actions but not truly seen and accepted for who they are. As noted, this is not something that Honneth (1992) or Fukuyama (1992) emphasize in their recognition models nor was it a hypothesis for my research. Although my empirical material supports this analysis,

I lack the data to draw any definitive conclusions on this matter. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

7. Conclusions and Discussion

The main goal of this thesis has been to address the shortage of empirical inquiries into lived experiences of workplace loneliness. To this end, I have collected and analyzed qualitative data from people who feel lonely at work. In summary, my research suggests that people often experience loneliness as sadness, shame, self-doubt, and ostracization. However, some participants also construct loneliness as strength, freedom, and individuality and consequently derive pride from the experience. Moreover, I have observed that people seem to cope with (workplace) loneliness by either pursuing social proximity and conformity or resorting to anti-social behavior, such as withdrawal and peer contempt. To explain this duality, I note people's bilateral need for connection and autonomy. Furthermore, I suggest that loneliness is a process that is, to some extent, shaped by how receptive the social environment is to the individual's attempt to alleviate loneliness. For example, a few of my research participants explain that although they had initially responded to workplace loneliness with increased gregariousness, they resorted to withdrawal when reintegration proved difficult. Likewise, when withdrawing is impossible (e.g., in some leadership roles), the individual might have no choice but to submit to loneliness or reconstruct the experience to make it more tolerable. From this perspective, workplace loneliness emerges as a transformative experience: it pushes the individual to change her situation, herself, or her mindset to alleviate emotional discomfort.

In this light, loneliness is not necessarily a negative phenomenon that should be avoided, but perhaps a message that asks for a constructive response. What workplace loneliness means (i.e., what workplace loneliness signals) is a question that has been largely overlooked by previous workplace loneliness research. Although a few prominent neuroscientists suggest that loneliness exists to protect the individual from the physical dangers of being alone (see Cacioppo, 2009; Cacioppo et al., 2015), I have argued that this naturalist approach, by itself, is unsatisfactory to make sense of loneliness in contemporary society, as physical isolation poses little threat to the modern individual. In addition, today people seem to suffer from loneliness in the vicinity of others. Addressing the why of workplace loneliness was therefore identified as an opportunity for me to make a theoretical contribution with this thesis. To this end, I formulated three distinct yet related answers to why people experience workplace loneliness: 1) loneliness is a sign of social alienation; 2) loneliness is a sign of self-alienation; and 3) loneliness is a sign of unfulfilled expectations for recognition. While the first perspective corresponds with the fear of abandonment, the second perspective can be understood as the burden of being together.

The recognition perspective, on the other hand, integrates the first two perspectives by emphasizing people's bilateral need for togetherness and individuality to

establish a positive self-image. From this angle, loneliness is not about being alone or feeling alone–i.e., the recognition perspective suggests that workplace loneliness is about feeling unseen, unheard, and not like an important member of the group. Drawing on Honneth's (1992) theory, this can be understood as a lack of solidarity, and loneliness may be conceptualized as an emotional response to this subjective situation. Moreover, this perspective suggests loneliness (as missing recognition) is painful because the individual is deprived of self-esteem. Consequently, this kind of loneliness (i.e., community, collective, or organizational loneliness) could be reframed as a desire for self-esteem. This desire can emerge both in the vicinity of others and when alone, but it does not have to. In other words, according to this perspective, a person who can maintain a positive self-relation in isolation will not experience loneliness. Boredom might be present, but the individual will ultimately be content with her own company. That said, this is possibly rare, as the theories at hand suppose that most people need intersubjective recognition to construct a positive self-image. Consequently, isolation is potentially a strong predictor of loneliness although not what causes it. Through this, the recognition perspective not only emphasizes why the individual should take her feelings of loneliness seriously but also provides novel insights into how loneliness is perhaps most effectively coped with (i.e., activities that increase self-esteem). This view opens new avenues for studying workplace loneliness and making sense of why people feel lonely despite being surrounded by colleagues. It is arguably on this note that I make my most important contributions to the academic progress of workplace loneliness.

My research suggests that organizational processes that inhibit intersubjective recognition (and hurt self-esteem) may lead to loneliness in the workplace. My analysis also indicates that workplaces that warp people's perceptions (negatively) and expectations (unrealistically) of recognition could lead to loneliness. Based on this, quantitative workplace loneliness scales, such as Wright's (2005), could be advanced by including feelings of denied or missing recognition[132] as well as signs of low self-esteem.[133] Feelings of dissimilarity (i.e., not being an equal) may also be relevant, as exemplified in the complex case of loneliness in leaders. By emphasizing the link between loneliness and recognition, this study also contributes to sociological recognition theories by illuminating how absent (or denied) recognition might be experienced and constructed. Moreover, I highlight how analogous phenomena such as alienation (e.g., Costas, 2009), stress (e.g., Johnsen, 2008), and boredom (e.g., Johnsen, 2011) are relevant to understanding workplace loneliness. Here, my empirical material supports the idea that loneliness is not a

[132] For example: 1) "I feel invisible at work," 2) "I feel that no one listens to my ideas at work," and 3) "I feel like my colleagues and superiors do not respect me."
[133] For example: a) "I do not like myself very much," b) "I don't think I add much value to this organization," and 3) "I feel like I am easily replaceable."

distinct experience but rather a complex one that overlaps with (and involves) many other feelings and emotions. By acknowledging these relationships, I highlight opportunities for cross-pollinating knowledge between different experiences in the workplace. I also investigated the relationship between belonging and loneliness in the workplace, which is a topic I will return to in a moment. Finally, I extend previous loneliness models (e.g., Weiss, 1973) with a typology that more effectively addresses workplace loneliness. All in all, my findings present relevant topics that future workplace loneliness research may investigate both qualitatively and quantitively. That said, my thesis not only provides a point of departure for further research on workplace loneliness but also contributes to the broader academic movement concerned with emotions in the workplace. To this end, I will now turn to discuss my overarching research concern: the potential role of loneliness in organizations.

The Role of Loneliness in Organizations

Even though loneliness might not have a socially expressive dimension, it can affect organizations directly and indirectly. As noted, previous research has pointed to loneliness having adverse consequences on work performance and commitment (e.g., Ozcelik & Barsade, 2011; Yilmaz, 2008). I have also noted research that suggests that loneliness can manifest as increased work creativity, adaptive problem-solving, and self-correcting behavior (Gafoor, 2020; Gabriel et al., 2020). Although I have not sought to measure or predict the effects of workplace loneliness in this thesis, my research allows for a discussion on the potential role(s) that loneliness plays in organizations. By projecting how individuals experience and cope with loneliness to a higher level, I can speculate on how this phenomenon manifests in organizations. This approach rests on the idea that even painful (and otherwise negative) emotions and experiences may serve essential functions for both the individual and the group (see Lindebaum & Jordan, 2012). This is a critical discussion point for loneliness, as it is generally perceived as a negative experience while also being transformative if responded to constructively. Like the distress caused by extreme hunger or exposure to excessive heat, loneliness might serve as a protective mechanism that encourages the individual to change her situation. Similarly, Johnsen (2016) framed boredom as an experience that safeguards the individual from anxiety, depression, and meaninglessness. Both loneliness and boredom, while often considered negative, may play an important role in people's wellbeing and provide collective benefits such as motivating invention and achievement. This also suggests that there is value in directing these drives toward desirable ends. In this section, I intend to make my contribution to critical and phenomenologically oriented workplace emotion research by discussing the potential role of loneliness in organizations as well as how this could be exploited.

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According to the social perspective, loneliness operates effectively when the individual manages to (re)integrate with her imminent group. This suggests that loneliness can fulfill a constructive role in organizations by fostering natural group processes. However, this perspective is somewhat superficial, as it only considers how the individual intentionally and constructively escapes loneliness through proximity seeking activities. But, as implied in my conceptualization of loneliness as a passion, loneliness might just as well be continuously suffered; the individual's attempt to alleviate loneliness can sometimes even worsen her situation. Moreover, to understand the role of loneliness, we need to consider how the individual attempts to establish a secure group membership. In my analysis, I have invoked sociological recognition theories that suggest that the individual pursues social norms in order to be recognized as a valuable member. However, this also means that loneliness (as the passion for recognition) has a performative dimension that

organizations may use. This was visible in my empirical material: a few research participants explained that loneliness made them more agreeable, work harder, and act against their own will and values. From this perspective, the fear of loneliness could facilitate normative control*:* it potentially makes the individual sensitive to the social environment and promotes self-discipline. Therefore, loneliness can govern the social environment by making individuals submissive to cultural and ethical rules (i.e., peer pressure).

As a mechanism, the passion for recognition potentially operates constantly, even without external influence.[134] Loneliness is, therefore, potentially a vital motivator in organizations, and without it, people might not be as inclined to work hard or adhere to social norms. Here, loneliness appears as a kind of social glue that keeps organizations together but also as a whip for the individual. The same has been said about belonging and social identity (Vugt & Hart, 2004; Amiot & Aubin, 2012: 563), and this is largely what Honneth (1992) meant by "recognition governing ethical life." From this perspective, it would be foolish not to manage loneliness. Moreover, to do so might be as simple as bringing people together while also shaping social norms and culture. There is arguably nothing insidious in this; it is merely the case of nudging people's tribalistic tendencies in a particular direction. Although proximity-seeking behavior is arguably a way to counter antisocial manifestations of loneliness (from an organizational perspective), too much of a good thing can be harmful.

From the current perspective, when peer pressure operates successfully, individuals comply with social norms, hoping to receive recognition and acceptance from the group. Through this, the individual may derive self-esteem, but it can also lead to over-conforming. This is essentially what Riesman (1950/2001) was concerned with when he problematized the "other-directed character." According to Riesman, conformity not only leads to self-alienation but also produces shallow interpersonal relationships where people only seek each other's approval to still their fear of rejection. This could have detrimental consequences for organizations, such as pluralistic ignorance, where people do not dare to speak against issues, not just harmful to the individual but potentially also to the business. This can lead to false consensus among leaders – i.e., they think their decisions are supported by the workers when, in fact, they are not. Therefore, loneliness that manifests as excessive proximity-seeking tendencies could produce a kind of social debt where social stability and order are established on shaky grounds.

[134] On this note, withdrawal (e.g., remote work) can offer relief, but at the same time deprives the individual of interpersonal recognition. Maybe this is why hybrid work solutions are popular: people spend enough time at home to become hungry for recognition, and just enough time in the office to have their appetite satiated. Therefore, her "unsocial sociality" is adhered to. Finding the right balance between remote work and office work could be one approach to address workplace loneliness.

Furthermore, in social environments that are governed by loneliness (as a fear of abandonment), emotions related to conflict (e.g., anger) may become increasingly stigmatized. This is what Gabriel and Lindebaum (2016) drew attention to in their conceptualization of moral anger. From this perspective, anger lets others know that they are expected to adjust their behavior. This mode of communication is perhaps crucial for a healthy social system (although it can also be misguided and abused). In addition, when negative emotions are suppressed, they can become internalized. Where a moment of expressed frustration might be enough to solve a minor conflict, suppressed anger is a breeding ground for antipathies. Here, William Blake's poem "A Poison Tree" (1794/2017) comes to my mind:

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

From this perspective, the role of anger is to resolve conflicts, and when it is internalized, the perception of personal conflict instead increases. This, in turn, can fuel feelings of disconnection and disgust. Thus, suppressed emotional expressions further erode the foundation that social stability is built on top of. Here, antisocial manifestations of loneliness (including anger) could be a constructive countermeasure to over-conformity and pluralistic ignorance. By challenging established norms, the deviant individual forces the group to react and re-evaluate. If the group responds constructively to the deviant, social conditions may evolve. But if the group rejects and suppresses her, norms are reinforced and change is stigmatized. On this note, conflict may be painful but is potentially nurturing on an inter-relational level, at least if it is dealt with constructively. But (the fear of) loneliness appears to be associated with conflict avoidance, either through conforming or withdrawing. For this reason, organizations may need to mitigate people's fear of rejection and abandonment. In line with this, the individualist perspective has argued that the purpose of loneliness is to overcome it (or learn to tolerate it) and thus break free from the endless pursuit of recognition (e.g., Nietzsche, 1886/1999). However, there may be other organizational implications of this, which I will consider in a moment.

Whether people are becoming more or less conflict avoidant is hard to say. However, as social systems evolve, they appear to favor more specialized and bureaucratic processes to accommodate a larger scale (see Durkheim, 1893/2014).[135] On this note, it has been argued that social systems that promote social quantity over quality are a breeding ground for loneliness (see Buber,

[135] Marcuse (1964/2002) also discusses this through his concept of the one-dimensional man where he associates the progression of industrial societies and purposive rationality with alienation.

1942/2005). Drawing on this, large social systems (including organizations) seem to rely on impersonal and frictionless interaction for stability, replacing reciprocity and trust with formal rules and contracts. In such systems, conflict is possibly regarded as a waste of human capacity.[136] Looking at this from another angle, it appears that increased dependence on control mechanisms for social coordination produces impersonal relationships.

Arendt (1951/1976) was also concerned how loneliness can be operationalized to domesticate the individual for totalitarian control. In other words, by emotionally severing the individual from her peers, the lonely person becomes vulnerable to direct means of control, both effectively and willingly. On this note, my thesis offers complementary insights to Costas's (2009) research on self-alienation: the lonely and self-alienated worker is potentially easier to manage because she is deprived of both self-esteem and peer support. This was visible in my empirical material. That is, the research participants who exhibited peer contempt also seemed to be more hard-working and take their work more seriously. Arguably, these anti-social workers still desired recognition, but when peer recognition was denied, they seemed to seek greater formal recognition (i.e., validation) and perhaps to be recognized as better than their peers (i.e., megalothymia). From this perspective, loneliness facilitates control, but external control also breeds loneliness, reinforcing its own mechanism. From a functional perspective, this is perhaps necessary for a social system to maintain stability as it grows,[137] but it can also create a hollow structure that may collapse upon itself.

Here, an organizational implication of loneliness becomes apparent: whether loneliness manifests as proximity-seeking or anti-social tendencies, it has a coordinating capacity. In other words, the passion for recognition makes people organizable without external systems for reward and punishment. From this perspective, it is not ideal for organizations to eliminate loneliness or the threat of abandonment as that may lead to lethargy unless workers are motivated in some other way. Therefore, loneliness (manifested as the passion for recognition) could be seen as an inexpensive motivator in organizations (compared to monetary rewards and individual freedom). Managing people's passion for recognition is perhaps fundamental to creating an effective workforce. This is a cynical perspective, but this mechanism is also potentially central to the existence of organizations. That is, without this type of loneliness, human coordination would

[136] This is also captured by Tönnies (1887/2011) in his concept *Gesellschaft*: a social constellation where friends and enemies are replaced with impersonal competition (see Asplund, 1991).

[137] Marcuse (1955) distinguishes between basic repression and surplus repression. The former refers to the repression of instincts that are necessary for social order, and the latter refers to excessive repression that causes more pain than good (p. 35). According to my analysis above, the described mechanism would fall into basic repression. That said, the line between basic and surplus repression is arguably fine and depends on what one considers adequate social order and performance.

be exceedingly difficult. Addressing this in a Weberian fashion, it may be suggested that organizations operate internally by moderating intersubjective relationships: to keep colleagues close, but not too close, briefly satisfying people's appetite for recognition (and validation) but leaving them hungry for more. This is potentially a fine line to walk. If the scale tips too far toward any side (i.e., uniting or dividing), the passion for recognition could go wrong.

Although I set out to challenge some of the negative views of loneliness as well as to oppose the argument that the 21st century is the age of loneliness (see Hertz, 2020), the discussion seems to have circled back to perceiving loneliness as a structural (and political) issue. Here, my analysis can be compared with Foucault's (1976/1998) view of power: loneliness is everywhere and comes from everywhere.[138] This view paints a gloomy picture of human civilization, but at the same time, without what I refer to as loneliness (and the passion for recognition), people would arguably be Hobbesian beasts or Nietzschean *übermench* (overmen) incapable of constructive coordination. As Aristotle (330BC/2008) argues: the individual who does not need a community (tribe/organization) is either a beast or a god (a superhuman). From this perspective, people do not manage loneliness, but like an invisible hand, loneliness manages people. This is essentially what Mijuskovic (2012) notes when framing loneliness as the primordial motivator of all human behavior. Here, loneliness becomes a phenomenon that enables organizations. Inversely, organizations operationalize loneliness by promising community and self-worth but gating this behind individual performance**.** Consequently, people's passion for recognition is directed toward the interests of the collective (or organization).

***

This completes my general contribution to qualitative emotion in organization literature. I have offered a phenomenon-centric perspective of workplace loneliness that accounts for its potential organizational element. With this study, I demonstrate that loneliness overlaps with a range of basic emotions in the workplace as well as with general concerns in emotion in organization literature, such as worker alienation and normative control. Consequently, I argue that loneliness must not be overlooked in qualitative workplace emotion research but considered as a fundamental emotional phenomenon in organizations. On this note, my research is also relevant to broader organization theory as it offers a perspective on why people choose to come together and why they sometimes prefer seclusion. In the following sections, I elaborate on the implications of my findings and point out opportunities for future research.

[138] Foucault (1976/1998) concludes that "Power is everywhere . . . [and] comes from everywhere" (p. 63).

Implications of Findings

Again, the main goal of my dissertation was to bring workplace loneliness into qualitative focus – specifically, to investigate how people perceive, make sense of, and cope with loneliness in the workplace. This knowledge enables us to extend empathy to those who feel lonely at work: to better understand what loneliness means to them. While my findings cannot be generalized into one simple answer, it has illustrated the different and complex ways people experience and cope with loneliness. These findings are useful to both researchers and managers, but directly applying this knowledge to practical situations could be ethically problematic, as highlighted earlier in this chapter. For this reason, I avoid prescriptive statements and instead maintain a theoretical standpoint that offers a novel view on the subject and sheds light on avenues for future research.

To reiterate, previous research focuses on the lack of social connections as the main driver of loneliness. By reframing loneliness as a desire for recognition, researchers can revisit past findings to explore how employees' unmet recognition needs (and expectations) may contribute to their feelings of loneliness. This approach could help identify previously overlooked factors influencing loneliness, such as workplace hierarchies, power dynamics, or perceived fairness in the distribution of recognition and other resources. If this perspective gains traction, it will also be relevant to further examine the role of organizational culture and policies in fostering recognition as well as the impact of diversity and inclusion initiatives on employees' sense of belonging and recognition. Additionally, researchers can investigate how various forms of recognition – e.g., verbal praise, promotions, or public acknowledgment – affect employees' feelings of loneliness in either direction. Although I propose some relevant investigation points in Chapter 6 (alongside the individualist perspective of loneliness), my empirical work does not explore this in depth, presenting an opportunity for future research.

Moreover, the recognition perspective has important implications for interventions aimed at addressing workplace loneliness. By acknowledging the importance of recognition, organizations could choose to develop strategies to enhance employees' self-esteem and reduce loneliness. Such strategies might include implementing formal recognition programs, promoting a culture of appreciation and gratitude, or providing training to managers on how to effectively recognize and validate employees' contributions. However, as previously discussed, this also points to the potential ethical implications of managing workplace loneliness. Finally, adopting the recognition perspective of loneliness in future research may necessitate the development of new methodological approaches to measure and assess loneliness. Researchers might want to consider creating or refining measurement tools that better capture the nuanced aspects of recognition-related loneliness, such as perceived recognition discrepancies or recognition-seeking behaviors. Additionally, future studies could further explore the use of qualitative

methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of employees facing loneliness due to lack of recognition.

This summarizes the general implications of my findings on workplace loneliness research. In addition, during my literature review, I identified a set of academic debates relevant to my study: 1) the dichotomy of workplace emotions (e.g., seeing emotions as either positive or negative); 2) the ethical implications of workplace belonging; and 3) the adverse effects of unrealistic expectations in the workplace. Although the previous analysis and discussion have touched on this, in this section, I reflect on each debate separately and consider what insights can be derived from my research.

Positive, Negative, and Abstract Emotions

Categorizing emotions as either positive or negative is a practice common among both scholars and laymen. This way of thinking supposes that certain emotional phenomena are designed to be avoided and therefore are negative. However, many scholars argue that both positive and negative emotions have favorable and unfavorable outcomes depending on the context and evaluation (Lindebaum & Jordan, 2012). In other words, the terms "positive" and "negative" are confusing because they do not specify for whom or in what context certain emotions are beneficial or detrimental. In addition, scholars have also argued that negative emotions are fundamental to the individual's identity process and relation to self and that avoiding them can lead to self-alienation (Hochschild, 1979/2012). Such a perspective complicates positivist workplace emotion research that seeks to discover ways to predict and promote positive emotions and prevent negative ones. Therefore, this clash may be seen as a metatheoretical dispute between positivism and interpretivism. Now, methodological conflicts are not necessarily an issue of concern as paradigmatic pluralism is arguably complementary. That said, future positivist research may discover new correlations by challenging old presumptions on what is positive and negative. However, this also comes with a few ethical implications that need to be considered.

First, if an emotional phenomenon is not categorized based on whether it is painful or pleasurable but rather by its effect on organizational performance, this legitimizes exploiting people's pain if it has a desirable outcome. This also translates to loneliness: a little bit of loneliness may be perceived as beneficial (i.e., positive) to organizations. To elaborate, imagine a situation where people feel naturally safe, such as a child in a family where the parents show unconditional love. This is arguably morally good parenting that should foster self-confidence and self-esteem in the child, but it could also make children more likely to disobey their parents. Drawing on my research, when people do not fear abandonment and are not burdened by social norms and cultural pressure, they may be less inclined to cooperate. This could further manifest as rudeness and self-entitlement, examples of nonconstructive attitudes and behaviors. These undesirable tendencies could

perhaps be countered by inflicting loneliness: making the threat of abandonment feel real (and dangerous) and forcing people to comply with collective rules (i.e., suppressing unethical aspects of themselves). In theory, this would make people more likely to conform, perform, and be gregarious. Although it is arguably unethical to exploit people's capacity for loneliness, it may also be necessary for organizational purposes and consequently "good" from a utilitarian standpoint.

This leads me to another relevant aspect of categorizing emotional phenomena as either negative or positive: are we referring to the experience and expression of the phenomenon or its existence (i.e., the capacity to experience/express). In Chapter 3, I exemplified this by citing Kierkegaard's (1849/1989) work on despair. Similarly, in this chapter, I suggest that although the experience of loneliness may be painful, the capacity to experience loneliness is an ability that may be fundamental to constructive group behavior, including organizations (and societies at large). If we were to treat loneliness with a pill, similar to how we often treat depression, that would potentially have catastrophic consequences on a structural level. Here, previous research has proposed CBT as an appropriate solution (e.g., Cacioppo et al., 2015; Wright, 2015), but I would say that this is only preferable if a person is lonely due to severely maladapted expectations and perceptions. My argument here is that everyday loneliness is a perfectly natural experience that may be responded to constructively, rather than suppressed or disregarded.[139] In management and organization research, this implies a continued focus on how painful experiences in the workplace affect the individual (and the group) both positively and negatively rather than trying to measure the negative effects of pain. This means approaching social, emotional, and existential pain as a symptom of an underlying issue that may be understood rather than silencing the pain and therefore miss an opportunity for improvement. With this approach, we may also realize that not all instances of loneliness require interventions, although there may be situations where loneliness manifests destructively for both the individual and the group and therefore requires interception. Ultimately, this suggests that we can come a long way simply by talking more openly about loneliness and reducing its stigma. This also translates to many other negative or painful emotional phenomena such as sadness, fear, anger, stress, and anxiety.

A second epistemological discord within emotion in organization literature that I have observed relates to the ambiguous relationship between emotional expression

[139] Regarding positive and negative passions, contemporary psychology sometimes distinguishes between harmonious passions and obsessive passions (see Vallerand, 2015). Integrating this with my theoretical framework, the difference between a harmonious or obsessive passion is not the object of desire but the intensity as well as how the individual responds to the desire. An example of this is Fukuyama's (1992) isothymia (as arguably a harmonious passion) and megalothymia (as potentially an obsessive passion). That said, I am disinclined to invoke psychology theories here as I believe passions to be a relevant concept precisely because it is not as psychologized as emotions.

and emotional experience. Here, some scholars delve deep into emotional experiences at work, while others inquire into the expression of these experiences, and only a few scholars address how the two relate. As previously discussed, this divide is complicated by the "emotional paradox" (see Barrett, 2006b), which suggests that there is no direct relationship between experienced and expressed emotions. Drawing on this perspective, loneliness is experienced when the individual constructs her experiential and cognitive activities as loneliness, but loneliness is observed when an individual scores high emotional deprivation on a loneliness scale. Similarly, we might think we see loneliness when someone looks isolated and sad. However, just because a person checks off all the items on a loneliness scale or is isolated, does not mean she feels lonely. Based on this, I chose to re-evaluate my conceptualization of loneliness as an emotion. For the same reason, I think workplace emotion literature would benefit from more clearly distinguishing between experienced emotion and expressed emotion. One way to do this, for example, would be to separate the feeling of anger from the emotion of anger by referring to them as such.[140] That said, in my case, to emphasize that loneliness is more than "just a feeling" while also not having a corresponding expression (emotion), I introduce "passion" as a concept that reflects desires of the heart or callings of the soul. With this typology, it becomes easier to discuss different kinds of emotional phenomena in the workplace because suddenly discrete emotion models (e.g., Tomkins, 1962/1992; Izard et al., 1993) do not appear as arbitrary but as centered on expressive emotions.[141] This also means that what is not identified as a discrete emotion is not automatically discarded as a mere feeling or mood.

For example, consider greed, which is sometimes categorized as an emotion and defined as an intense and selfish desire for something (see Seuntjens et al., 2015; Lambie & Haugen, 2019). Greed does not have an expressive dimension like sadness or happiness (unless we consider an evil grin and hand rubbing an expression of greed). Greed can, therefore, only be conceptualized as an abstract emotion (or experience) that makes the individual move – it makes her pursue abundance (e.g., money, food, power, etc.). Invoking my proposed typology here, I see greed as the passion for abundance, a painful void that the individual is trying to fill with excessive material and symbolic resources. Similarly, Johnsen (2016) refers to boredom as an abstract emotion that arises when the individual experiences

[140] It has been noted that the split between feeling (i.e., experienced emotional phenomenon) and emotion (i.e., expressed emotional phenomenon) does not account for the physiological function. However, the physiology is arguably not a concern for management and organization scholars, which is why I do not consider it in this model.

[141] An arguably simple yet effective way to identify basic emotions is to determine whether the phenomenon can be communicated with an illustrated emoji face (using only natural facial expressions). For example, sadness, shame, anger, happiness, disgust, and surprise are all emotional phenomena that can easily be identified on a photo or illustration. As noted, these emotions can also be found on most basic lists of emotions (e.g., Frijda, 1986; Ekman, 1993; Parrot, 2001).

meaninglessness. Here, boredom is a pain that pushes the individual to fill the moment with meaning. Therefore, boredom can be understood as the "passion for meaningfulness." This aligns with Johnsen's (2016) argument that boredom is a transformative experience – i.e., it encourages the individual to change her situation (p. 1413). From this perspective, loneliness (as a passion for recognition) must also be understood as transformative, as it pushes the individual (or rather pulls her), which I have already discussed. The same may be said about greed. So, this perspective facilitates approaching greed, boredom, and loneliness as expressionless emotional phenomena that still have structural implications in the workplace.

More interestingly, this model points to an overlap across these different passions: they may all be related to an individual's relation-to-self. This can be contrasted with the observation that emotions seem to be more externally oriented (i.e., provoked by an external event and directed toward an external object). Passions, on the other hand, come from within (although may be influenced by the environment). Projecting my thesis onto the other two mentioned passions (as strong desires), I suggest that greed and boredom are painful because the individual experiences anxiety over her self-worth.[142] Elaborating on this: greed pushes the individual to increase her self-worth by accumulating more than she needs at the moment. Here, excessive resources potentially increase both her social status and sense of security but can also be compared with Fukuyama's megalothymia. Meanwhile, boredom pushes the individual to increase her self-esteem by pursuing meaningful (and ethical) activities (i.e., behavior that increases her chances of recognition). Considering this, it becomes important to note the difference between boredom (i.e., inactive restlessness) and doing something boring (e.g., a dull and monotonous activity) as a boring task may still be perceived as meaningful if it increases a person's chances of receiving intersubjective recognition (or in other ways benefitting her). While Johnsen (2011, 2016) was onto something similar when he pointed out the transformative capacity of boredom, he did not emphasize the potential ethical (and also normative) dimension of boredom. Costas and Kärreman (2016), on the other hand, touch on this by pointing to how the inflation of expectations raises the bar for what is considered ethical (and meaningful) and worthy of recognition. I will return to this in a moment.

Now, conceptualizing loneliness as a passion is just that, a conceptualization. It is a way to make sense of a phenomenon, but it is not the only way. That said, I do find this distinction helpful on both an epistemological and ontological level because I believe the value of concepts such as "emotion" is acquired through their contrast with other terms. In other words, without nuance, words (and language) are

[142] Two other emotional phenomena that resonate with this are jealousy and envy. They can also be seen as desires that are related to an individual's self-image.

meaningless. As noted, this can happen to "emotion" if the term is used for any experience or feeling. This does not mean that I am advocating for establishing a subfield called "passions in organizations." Because I still see passions as emotional phenomena, I think passions and emotions should be studied alongside each other. For example, passions (fulfilled or denied) are likely to be a significant source of expressed emotions. Hence, investigating passions in the workplace is perhaps fundamental to understanding expressed workplace emotions. However, as Johnsen (2011) argues about boredom, these phenomena must be studied on an experiential level that makes sense to the individual who experiences them. On this note, I find the term "passion" attractive as it has not fallen victim to the same reification (and psychologization) as the term "emotion" in academic discourse. At the same time, I understand if organization scholars are cautious about invoking this term due to its religious and mystical connotations. I will elaborate on this later in this chapter.

The Dark Side of Workplace Belonging

Throughout this thesis, I have championed the need to consider the beneficial aspects of negative phenomena. For this reason, it would be neglectful of me not to consider the potential undesirable consequences of positive phenomena. On this note, I have observed that previous workplace belonging research tends to frame belonging as something universally desirable and good in organizations (see Chapter 2). This makes sense, as belonging is enjoyable and seems to correlate with organizational boons, such as individual performance (Kellerman & Reece, 2019) and stress-resilience (Shakespeare-Finch & Daley, 2017). At the same time, this optimistic view diverts the discussion from the ethical implications of workplace belonging. Meanwhile, by looking at belonging through the lens of loneliness, a more nuanced perspective of both phenomena may be developed. This is particularly relevant as little effort has been put into integrating workplace loneliness and workplace belonging literature.

In Chapter 2, I note that workplace belonging, at first glance, appears as the antithesis of workplace loneliness, both conceptually and empirically. For example, while workplace loneliness is positively correlated with turnover intentions (Orhan et al., 2016; Kaymaz et al., 2014; Gozukara et al., 2017), workplace belonging has a negative relationship with the desire to leave an organization (Morajkar, 2020). Seeing belonging and loneliness as two sides of the same coin presents a convenient model but can also be misleading. That is, my analysis reveals that loneliness and belonging are related but should not be understood as symmetrical antipodes. In particular, I note that belonging has temporal and material dimensions that loneliness seems to lack. In other words, people feel a sense of belonging to a time and place (and all the material and symbolic objects that come with it, such as clothing, architecture, foods, scents, and language). Therefore, belonging is not solely an intersubjective process. Loneliness, on the other hand, seems to be more about intimacy and recognition, as sources for self-esteem. Meanwhile, belonging

and loneliness overlap in the sense that belonging can potentially facilitate intersubjective recognition by providing a social arena where people share basic values and traits. However, it does not automatically make an individual feel valuable. From this perspective, loneliness is more individualized as it depends on a person's subjective feeling of self-worth, whereas belonging is a more collective (shared) situation. It may also be said that loneliness appears to be a moment-to-moment experience as the individual is never truly safe – i.e., the threat of loneliness is (almost) always present. This keeps the individual on her toes, even if she belongs in her immediate group. On this note, sensing togetherness potentially makes loneliness even more threatening because the individual has more to lose.

A potential critical concern that arises here is whether belonging and loneliness can be operationalized simultaneously as distinct motivators in the workplace, for example, by making the individual feel as if she belongs but that she is also not a natural member and needs to perform to remain valuable. Like a push and pull mechanism, this could potentially direct people's desire for belonging and fear of loneliness toward organizationally-defined ethical behavior. However, as noted, there are potential adverse effects to belonging as it largely depends on exclusion. In other words, for membership to be valuable and desirable, the in-group must have boundaries. Therefore, any benefit from group belonging must be understood as favoritism, where outsiders are discriminated against. As people want to maximize their chances of being favored, they are often attracted to those who they perceive as similar (see Montoya et al., 2008), which can lead to segregation, inequality, and inter-group conflicts. This was expressed by a few of my research participants. Therefore, belonging must not be seen as a universally virtuous drive as it can lead to ostracization, denigration, and intergroup hostility. Here, the dark side of belonging is not loneliness, but the tribalistic baggage of belonging itself. Some of the negative social implications of loneliness (as discussed earlier in this thesis) may perhaps be better understood as undesirable effects of belonging. This is something future workplace belonging and workplace loneliness research may want to investigate further.

Workplace Loneliness in a Work-Centric Society

In a world where people have their social, emotional, and community needs fulfilled outside of work, workplace loneliness would arguably be a non-issue. Unfortunately, this is not only a utopia: contemporary society is arguably moving in the opposite direction. Communal life in the western world has dwindled over the past century: Americans have fewer friends than ever before (AEI, 2021), the share of single households is increasing all around the world (UN, 2019), and religious and other communal activities have declined sharply over the past 50 years (Putnam, 2001). This does not necessarily mean that people are lonelier today; in fact, research indicates the opposite (Clark et al., 2015). But what it does suggest is

that people need to fulfill their intersubjective needs elsewhere. Undeniably, the internet has replaced some of the lost interaction, but social media is arguably defective in comparison with real-world interaction in terms of providing intimacy and intersubjective recognition. If anything, social media is effective at inflicting FOMO, making people feel like relative outsiders, and fostering unhealthy expectations. Relating this to my previous analysis of different kinds of recognition in the workplace, it may be suggested that social media offers channels for acquiring validation and approval but are less potent at fostering empathy and intimacy. This could lead some individuals to put forward an increasingly fabricated social media persona to maximize validation. However, they will likely feel unrecognized for who they truly are and experience loneliness and depression despite being popular online. Of course, this is not always the case, and there are healthy ways to use social media. Generally speaking, it is safe to assume that social media are not beneficial for mental health and that we need to look elsewhere for a social arena that facilitates intersubjective recognition and feelings of belonging.

As noted, work has remained a relatively stable pillar in many people's lives. As other social arenas have disappeared, the importance of solidarity in the workplace has arguably increased. That is, in a society centered around work, being without a job or feeling ostracized on the job may leave some people without any meaningful group membership in their lives. Perhaps at some time in history, work was work, but today work is more than just the execution of tasks. Many employers expect their workers to be creative, social, and good. But demanding more out of workers also means that people potentially put greater expectations on what they get out of their job. Organizations may further aggravate this by presenting themselves as families and promising a strong sense of togetherness and lasting friendships while not being able to provide this to each and every member. As Costas emphasizes (2009, 2012), high expectations could leave individuals vulnerable to disappointment, and disappointment may be coupled with feelings of rejection, abandonment, and loneliness. From this angle, workplace loneliness is perhaps even more painful in contemporary post-bureaucratic organizations than in more traditional organizations. For this reason, understanding workplace loneliness may be crucial to grasp loneliness in broader society. Again, work could potentially offer a cure to the loneliness epidemic, but it could also make it worse. The question is whether an organization that actively attempts to foster community and solidarity mitigates or exacerbates loneliness. I suspect both: It makes some colleagues feel intimacy, belonging, and solidarity at the price of making others in the organization lonely.

On the other hand, any increase in loneliness (in society and workplaces) should not necessarily be blamed on structural changes. Rather, I want to reiterate Costas's concerns about the inflation of expectations (see also Costas & Kärreman, 2016).

Perhaps, loneliness is related to a progressive inflation of what is required to be recognized as a good and successful (i.e., valuable) person today. In other words, the bar might have been raised for what the individual needs to achieve to think positively about herself. This applies to education level, income, intelligence, expert knowledge, and physical aesthetics, to name a few. And with the internet, people no longer compare themselves and their peers with people in their proximity but with super achievers from all around the world. Additionally, globalization and growing populations have affected the job and housing market. Another market that has been transformed over the past two decades is the dating world. Consequently, the competition in all spheres of life is fierce, which possibly further fuels unrealistic expectations and demands. All this may be especially difficult for the younger generations, who likely will struggle to achieve the same as their parents (in terms of property and family). I will not go further into how norms and standards are potentially warped in contemporary society, but I want to emphasize that being unable to live up to social (and self-) expectations may be a cause of distress and angst that could manifest as meaninglessness (i.e., boredom), self-alienation, powerlessness, and, perhaps most importantly, loneliness.

On a related note, in this thesis, I have used "incels" (involuntary celibates) as an example of loneliness gone wrong. To reiterate, incels exhibit a fierce hatred toward the other sex, but at the root of this antagonism is a desire for intimacy and recognition. These lonely men want nothing more than to be loved, but when they struggle to find a female partner who will accept their affection and offer some in return, they repel the entire opposite sex to protect themselves from the feeling of rejection. Consequently, despicable behavior is associated with this community, and incels have become shunned by society. As these individuals feel increasingly abandoned by everyone around them, they find respite in their virtual fellowship.[143] Ultimately, this may only feed an "us versus them" situation. Although these men may withdraw physically from social spaces, they cannot withdraw formally. Therefore, they are trapped in a social system that offers them little sympathy. While I do not want to contribute to the stigma around loneliness, it is important to note that an individual who perceives her immediate social environment as a threat but is unable to escape may become potentially dangerous. Like an animal trapped in a corner, she may retaliate. This can be seen in terrorist attacks carried out by people who identify as incels, although it is arguably unfair to project such horrendous crimes on the entire incel community.

[143] Men who identify as incels tend to find solidarity with each other in online forums. From this perspective, it may be suggested that where these men have failed to derive constructive identities from the real world, they instead find commonality with other equals online. This facilitates identity processes but may further increase the perceived distance to the real world.

From this perspective, addressing loneliness in society is not just about preventing a decline in health, as argued by Holt-Lunstad et al. (2010, 2015; see Chapter 1). Loneliness (as the passion for recognition) may lie at the foundation of much social conflict we are witnessing today. Although conflict is not necessarily bad, inflamed social conflict is rarely productive. However, drawing on my research, it might be too much to expect the individual to always respond constructively to her feelings of loneliness. Therefore, it is the group's responsibility to do so. How do we do this? As a first step, we may extend our empathy and recognize that loneliness is a valid experience and that we would likely have felt the same had we been in their shoes. This is perhaps the most fundamental form of intersubjective recognition we can give each other, and with it I am sure we can go a long way.

Lessons, Shortcomings, and Future Research

This thesis addresses the role of loneliness in organizations by qualitatively exploring how people experience and cope with workplace loneliness as well as by analyzing why they feel lonely at work. My findings suggest that loneliness plays a central role in organizations, warranting increased attention from management and organization scholars. Despite my comprehensive effort, the phenomenon requires further research and remains a promising academic area. Whereas my study has been limited by a few challenges, particularly in empirical aspects, I hope that future studies can improve on my shortcomings. These improvements include reconsidering a few conceptual and theoretical assumptions. In this section, I highlight these assumptions and their consequences as well as point out some additional opportunities for future research.

First, I want to compare my methodological approach to grounded theory (GT). As described in Chapter 4 (Method), I have not committed to either phenomenology or GT but have drawn inspiration from both. However, in the end, my study more closely resembles GT than I initially anticipated. A logical approach would have been to reframe the project (in particular the method chapter) according to GT. At the same time, I feel that such a retrofit construction would be dishonest to my research journey and in discord with my metatheoretical commitments. Additionally, there is a notable gap between my empirics and my theoretical and conceptual contributions that can only be filled with my theoretical framework. Therefore, it is questionable how grounded my theoretical contributions are after all. With respect to phenomenology, a departure from this method is that I have not only considered the individuals' experiences but also subconscious coping practices, such as repulsion and peer contempt. The reason for this, is that with the emotional perspective, I am equally interested in people's experiences as in their behaviors. Although my flexible approach is arguably a methodological shortcoming, it supports my generation of novel and arguably meaningful findings.

That said, had I restarted this project today, knowing all that I know now, there are many things I would have done differently, such as wholeheartedly committing to either phenomenology or GT. More learnings are discussed in detail in the next subsections.

Conceptual and Theoretical Reflections

This thesis rests on a few assumptions. First and foremost, I have assumed that loneliness can be separated from aloneness. This perspective is supported by previous research, but it should not be taken for granted: many people perceive no difference between aloneness and loneliness, and some cultures make no distinction between the two. The Swedish language is such a context, where the word *ensam* is used for both the state of being alone and the feeling of loneliness. This linguistic limitation presented an opportunity to explore the phenomenology of loneliness in my study. However, for the same reason, loneliness may have been conflated with other social and emotional agonies such as shame, sadness, and anxiety. Loneliness stands out, on the other hand, due to its directional nature, implying a longing for love, friendship, or solidarity. In my study, I focus on this desire, conceptualizing it as a passion. I also intentionally conflated loneliness with the fear of loneliness to emphasize the broader implications of this passion beyond the acute experience. This aligns with both the phenomenological perspective and the idea of loneliness as social pain (e.g., Moustakas, 1961/2016; Cacioppo, 2009). As a result, when discussing coping strategies, I include both proactive and reactive behaviors. Again, this makes it exceedingly difficult to delimitate loneliness as a distinct phenomenon. While it has been argued that separating loneliness from the fear of loneliness is impossible (Mijuskovic, 2012), future research may want to reconsider this approach and whether a stricter conceptualization would help explain workplace loneliness.

A second conceptual model that I accept in this thesis, is that loneliness may be separated into different phenotypes. I used Weiss's social and emotional loneliness as a foundation but expand this model to account for workplace-related loneliness. Drawing on my empirical material, I address this by introducing the concept of organizational loneliness,[144] which arises from feelings of alienation or ostracism on a group (or tribe) level. This is a clearly visible pattern in my empirical material that could not be explained by existing loneliness models and theories. Nonetheless, the distinction between social, emotional, and organizational loneliness remains speculative, and the phenotype perspective warrants further examination.

[144] Prior to naming it organizational loneliness, I considered various terms, such as collective loneliness, tribal loneliness, and community loneliness. Although organizational loneliness serves this thesis, I am not a strong advocate of this term and I encourage future research to reconsider the naming.

First, assuming that the proposed loneliness phenotypes are biologically or phenomenally distinct would arguably be naïve. Rather, they may be viewed as the context where individuals experience a lack of desired intimacy and recognition. Although I have provided some conceptual distinctions and empirical material that support this, I have not presented evidence that social, emotional, and organizational loneliness are experienced or coped with differently. This model, however, is useful for identifying potential deficits in individuals' social lives. Building on Honneth's (1992) recognition theory, I argue that individuals possess a range of qualities that they hope to have acknowledged, such as humor, intelligence, attractiveness, and morality. Different types of relationships likely provide recognition for different qualities. Consequently, the experience of social or emotional loneliness may not be due to a lack of friendship or an intimate partner but rather a lack of recognition for specific qualities. This perspective suggests that love, friendship, and community are not distinct phenomena, and it is possible for a single person to fulfill all these relational needs, albeit unlikely.

Furthermore, expectations play a crucial role in determining the types of recognition that individuals desire. For example, people generally do not expect or demand recognition for attractiveness or lovability from friends, but they do seek acknowledgement for being funny, intelligent, and culturally compatible. For this reason, even if a friend recognizes the individual as attractive, this may not be enough for her to establish a durable idea of herself as such. Instead, it is perhaps only when a person whom she finds attractive and lovable recognizes her in the same way, that her desires for recognition are fulfilled. This is visible in cases where acknowledgement of being attractive by the wrong person is constructed as harassment and experienced as disgust.[145] Expanding on this in the context of workplace loneliness is a topic future studies might want to consider.

On the other hand, the prevalence of work spouses challenges my assumption that people do not desire intimate relationships at work. Here, the term work spouse refers to having an "exclusive, intimate, nonsexual shared bond with a work

[145] With this in mind, Honneth's (1992) "love" (as a mode of recognition) could be seen as recognition received from a person who the individual recognizes as lovable (and from whom love is desired). Similarly, "solidarity" (as a mode of recognition) equals received recognition from a group where solidarity is desired. Removing a layer of abstraction here, loneliness could be seen as a longing for meaningful company (i.e., love, friendship, and community). This resonates with my concept regarding a passion for recognition. To offer one last comment regarding my conceptualization of loneliness as a passion for recognition, I am not advocating for this to become the universal definition of loneliness, but I do think it is a helpful perspective to make sense of the phenomenon. As noted, loneliness may just as well be referred to as an intense longing or desire. In fact, this can be derived from my empirical material too: many of my research participants described loneliness as "*.." saknad av*" ("a missing of… [something]"). However, this Swedish expression may just as well be interpreted as "the longing for [something]."

colleague" (Whitman & Mandeville, 2021).[146] Surprisingly, this is not a rare or exotic phenomenon: according to survey studies, up to half of the U.S. workforce have or have had a person who they considered their work spouse (Thorson & McBride, 2020). Although the term work spouse typically implies a platonic relationship, one in two people with work spouses also admits having romantic feelings for their special colleague (SHRM, 2022). This makes the phenomenon of work spouses critical to understanding workplace loneliness. However, the topic did not appear in my empirical material. Perhaps those who have a work spouse did not participate in my study because they are not feeling lonely at work or maybe my participants were not comfortable sharing details about their desire for a work spouse. The only research participant who touched on the topic was the young man[147] who, in Vignette #4, describes loneliness after losing his mentor and a friendly receptionist, both apparently of the opposite sex. It is possible that the receptionist fulfilled a sort of spouse role for him, which also explains why he experienced her departure as painful. With this in mind, to understand workplace loneliness, we might have to study those who are not lonely at work to see what they have that lonely people lack. Only studying those who feel lonely is arguably an inverse survivor bias, where we fail to observe how people successfully cope with loneliness at work. Although I have attempted to deal with this by integrating workplace belonging with workplace loneliness, there is more to be done here.

On a similar note, I have championed people's need for intersubjective recognition, but at the same time, some people seem to be capable of deriving a positive self-image through parasocial relationships with celebrities and influencers as well as with gods and pets. Although this turns my research on its head, it emphasizes the subjective dimension of recognition. In other words, it is not about being seen and heard but about feeling seen and heard. Here, popular video bloggers, for example, are likely adept at making their followers feel seen and understood despite never meeting them in person. Likewise, a firm conviction that a god watches over you and cares for you could be enough to derive satisfactory self-esteem. Lastly, pets are arguably exceptional at making people feel loved: cats and dogs, for example, do not care about how we look, how much we make, or what we have achieved. When pets and humans bond, pets stay endlessly devoted. This is something future research on (workplace) loneliness could investigate further.

Regarding my choice of theories, a valid critique is that I have been too theoretically flexible. Indeed, in this study, I loosely deploy a wide range of theories and ideas rather than committing wholeheartedly to a single one. Although intentional, this

[146] While work spouse typically refers to a colleague of the opposite sex, it can also be used for same-sex work-relationships.

[147] I do not know the sex or gender of most of my research participants; however, based on the content of the narrative, I think it is safe to assume that this was written by a relatively young man (or at least he was young at the time of the narrative).

may impair the contribution of my research to broader theory building. On this note, the Affect Theory of Social Exchange (e.g., see Lawler, 2001) could have been used actively to develop a model for workplace loneliness behavior. Similarly, Systems Theory and Game Theory could have been deployed to explain the role of loneliness in organizations. Another theory that might be of interest is Emotional Chaos Theory. Chaos Theory is not about disorder, as often presumed, but about how order emerges from seemingly chaotic feedback processes (e.g., Griffiths, 2020). Arguably, the idea that chaos can also be systemic resonates with how loneliness has appeared in this thesis.

Another theoretical critique of this thesis is that I perhaps draw an unjustifiably hard line between previous research on workplace loneliness and emotion in organization literature. There are a few scholars, such as Ozcelik and Barsade (2018) and Dor-Haim (2021), whose approaches intersect with interpretivism and therefore should perhaps be considered under the emotion in organizations umbrella. Admittedly, I am in no position to define what may be regarded as emotion in organization literature or not. My approach here was merely to acknowledge that more general and popular inquiries found in workplace emotion literature (e.g., works by Stephen Fineman and Yiannis Gabriel) have not considered loneliness to its full extent. For this reason, one of my ambitions with this thesis has been to integrate previous research on workplace loneliness with broader workplace emotion literature. While I have come a bit on the way, more work remains to be done, but I will leave that for future research projects. Moreover, since I started this project, the research on workplace loneliness has progressed significantly and has become a respectable body of literature. It is, therefore, not necessary for future workplace loneliness research to lean on broader emotion in organization research, although I vouch for cross-pollinating knowledge between different emotional phenomena, especially when dealing with complex and multidimensional phenomena such as loneliness.

Thoughts on Limitations, Validity, and Trustworthiness

When I started this research project in 2017, the world had never heard of Covid-19, nor could many imagine the far-reaching consequences of this respiratory virus. Halfway through this dissertation, the Covid-19 pandemic struck. This greatly affected my research project, not only empirically but fundamentally. I had set out to explore how loneliness is experienced and coped with in the office, but suddenly the phenomenon disappeared from the face of the earth (at least in Sweden), as virtually all office workers now worked from home. Of course, people were still lonely, perhaps even more so, but they were lonely in isolation. So, while loneliness is already difficult to study due to stigma (see Wright & Silard, 2021), this made it incredibly hard to find research participants who matched my criteria. Whereas I initially aimed for 50 interviews, I ended up with only ten. This might be an adequate number concerning data saturation (see Hennink & Kaiser, 2022) but

arguably unsatisfactory considering the scope of this thesis. To complement my low number of interviews, I deployed surveys and carried out a netnographic study. While there is strength in my diverse approach, it is also somewhat inconsistent. For a more standardized method of analysis, I recommend that future studies use a single method of data collection, whether surveys or netnography.

Regarding the validity of my findings, I have done my best to adhere to Sandberg's (2005) principles for communicative validity, pragmatic validity, and transgressive validity. Admittedly, a weak point here is arguably my communicative validity as I have had little direct interaction with most of the research participants and therefore have not been able to establish a community of interpretation with them. On the other hand, my netnographic study could also be seen as advantageous for communicative validity, since I have observed how loneliness is constructed collectively in social interaction. As for pragmatic validity, considering that I have emphasized lived experiences and real scenarios of loneliness in the workplace, I argue my study is robust in this regard. However, it should also be noted that, in line with this, I never asked my research participants explicitly how they experience or cope with workplace loneliness, but I did ask them to tell their stories as they saw fit. Although I sought to capture narratives of workplace loneliness, it may be argued that my empirical material contains little narrative data as most entries do not have clear beginnings and endings. On the other hand, suggesting that a narrative analysis can only be carried out on material that follows a clear narrative structure is arguably demanding too much from my research participants.

Meanwhile, my theoretical approach to why people experience workplace loneliness as well as the discussion on the role of loneliness in organizations are arguably a departure from pragmatic validity as these concerns are somewhat disconnected from people's experiences. On this note, a valid critique of this thesis is that my split interest between the experience and explanation for loneliness has spread my contributions thin. In retrospect, it would perhaps have been enough only to study how people experience and cope with loneliness and call it a day. However, admittedly, I would not have been content with that approach as I am not just interested in listening to descriptions of loneliness but equally enthusiastic about making sense of the phenomenon. That said, these descriptions have been fundamental for my analysis of why people experience workplace loneliness as well as for discussing the potential organizational implications of the phenomenon. Finally, regarding transgressive validity, it has been my ambition to celebrate methodological and theoretical pluralism and offer multiple answers to each research question. Moreover, I argue that my multimethod approach, while perhaps complicating the analysis, provides validity as it is a kind of triangulation. As noted, despite originating from diverse methods, the empirical material demonstrated the same patterns throughout. This and my openness toward different perspectives lead me to argue that my findings are reliable and that this thesis is trustworthy.

Another empirical limitation of this research project is that I have potentially neglected occupational differences. In this thesis, as long as the individual identified as an office worker (knowledge/white-collar), their narratives and descriptions were included in the analysis. Future research may consider setting more narrow boundaries for occupational identity, similar to Dor-Haim's (2021) study of loneliness in principals. In particular, I think there is much to gain from a better understanding of loneliness in leaders and consultants due to their high status and power in organizations. In my thesis, I have invoked Fukuyama's (1992) concept of megalothymia to analyze how loneliness could manifest in organizations (especially leaders), and this is something I think future research can expand on by asking, for example, the following question: Are people who are prone to loneliness more or less likely to pursue power in organizations? Moreover, in my study, I put aside demography and personal history, but exploring these more in-depth might reveal individual factors that influence how workplace loneliness is experienced and coped with. For example, my findings echo previous research that point to a bilateral relationship between loneliness and low self-esteem. Investigating this relationship further may be of interest to future research. Moreover, as my empirical context has been limited to Sweden, future research could continue to explore how workplace loneliness is experienced and expressed in other cultures and languages.

Abandoned Methods

Although I have done my best to motivate my methodological approach, my study was not clearly defined upfront but is the result of a series of experiments. For example, early on, I considered conducting traditional ethnographic fieldwork inside an organization (see Van Maanen, 2016) to address my research questions. Here, observations in combination with interviews could have offered valuable insights into how loneliness manifests in social action as well as granted a more hands-on approach to investigating the organizational implications of loneliness. To explore this possibility, I contacted 20 local (Stockholm-based) companies, but all declined or ignored the proposal. I received no explanation for their disinterest, but I suspect that had my study been on workplace belonging they might have been more willing to cooperate. This closed the door on this approach, but in retrospect, even if collaboration with a company had been established, it would not necessarily have been a fruitful method as it would still require me to find people inside the company who describe their experiences as loneliness. Exactly how this would have been achieved was never considered. Although I struggled to recruit research participants from the general population, it is possibly even more difficult to find employees willing to admit and share their experiences of workplace loneliness when the researcher is collaborating with the employer. Therefore, my disorganized approach to recruiting participants was likely beneficial in this respect, but the downside is that the organization(s) remains largely a black box for me.

A second method that I considered was focus groups. In focus groups, a small number of relatively homogenous people are asked to discuss a topic (see Kitzinger, 1995). Here, the researcher's role is to listen and record the material with limited influence on the group. This approach can generate great insights into what a phenomenon means on a group level, but a downside is that individuals may distance themselves from their own experiences and instead form a collective attitude toward the phenomenon. While this method may provide useful phenomenographic material, it is unlikely to yield rich narratives on lived experiences. While I have not deployed phenomenology (although at several points I have tried[148]), the problem formulation at hand comes with a set of empirical prerequisites. First, for an individual to provide experiential descriptions, she must have experienced loneliness firsthand. If, on the other hand, research participants speak of loneliness generally, this should be understood as phenomenographic material (see Marton, 1986). Although some phenomenographic material has been included in this study,[149] it was not the priority.

If this thesis were phenomenographic-centric, I would have asked the following questions: What do people think workplace loneliness is like? or What do people think about workplace loneliness? To respect this distinction and to avoid taking the role of a diagnostician, it was necessary to seek out individuals who already categorize their experiences as loneliness. This approach is inverse to many other inquiries of emotional and existential ailments in the workplace (e.g., Costas, 2009), but it is arguably more potent at capturing what loneliness means to those who experience it rather than how the researcher operationalizes and classifies it. The downside is that such a path further complicates the recruitment of research participants. On the other hand, with my approach, each interview and every survey entry are relevant to the research problem, because the sample has already been

[148] For example, a method I have invested much effort into is Moustakas's (1990) heuristic inquiry. Moustakas (1961/2016) first deploys this approach in his pioneering study of loneliness but did not explicitly describe the process until three decades later. Heuristic inquiry involves learning and discovery through trial-and-error: it is a process that emerges as the researcher is trying to make sense of the phenomenon (ibid). In many ways, heuristic inquiry resembles Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology as the researcher's journey is a fundamental part of the research process (see Heidegger, 1962/2001). It also echoes Gadamer's (1975/2004) sentiment that all knowledge is essentially self-knowing. What makes heuristic inquiry unique from traditional phenomenology is its emphasis on the research culminating in a creative synthesis. This could be anything from a poem, a painting, or a fictional story, where the researcher demonstrates her understanding of the phenomenon by imitating it (Moustakas, 1990; Patton, 2015:120). Inspired by this, I wrote multiple and extensive fictional stories on loneliness (largely inspired by Murakami, whose work I think excellently portrays loneliness). I later realized that I primarily pursued this approach in a fear of not being able to collect enough hetero-empirical material. As the study progressed and the empirical material was strong enough to stand on its own, I felt that any fictional representation of the phenomenon would only take away from the study. Therefore, this project did not make it into the dissertation. Throughout the years, I have also tried applying more traditional phenomenology, but to no avail.

[149] For example, parts of the netnographic material may be categorized as phenomenographic.

culled. That said, an implication of this is that there might be a selection bias toward those who suffer or have suffered from more severe and persistent forms of loneliness. However, by adopting multiple methods, I have aspired to gather a wide range of experiences and expressions of workplace loneliness and avoided over-representing a particular group of people.

Another method that I took quite far is autoethnography. In earlier versions of this thesis, I included an extensive piece on my relationship and history with loneliness. But similar to my phenomenological ambitions (see earlier footnote), I think I only did it to compensate for the lack of hetero-empirical material. Although my autoethnographic work did not make it into the final version of this thesis, a shorter autobiographic version can be found in the appendix. My personal relationship with (workplace) loneliness is arguably both a strength and weakness as it helps me empathize with my research participants but also colors my interpretation of the material. Considering this, future research on workplace loneliness may benefit from either doubling down on the subjective approach (e.g., invoking less theory and instead drawing more on personal/autoethnographic/autobiographic material) or approaching others' experiences of workplace loneliness without a personal relationship with the phenomenon. A final empirical project that I started but abandoned was collecting descriptions of workplace loneliness from English-speaking people to compare with my Swedish data. This involved translating the survey into English and posting it in an online research forum, collecting 10 responses.[150] However, I ultimately excluded this material from my thesis. Nonetheless, I believe further exploration is warranted, and future research on

[150] The following is a summary of the ten responses (marked SE1-10, not included in the previous empirical material): "[Loneliness is] cold, wishing to sleep … low energy [and] a crippling depression [as the result of ostracization]" (SE1); On "[Loneliness] slows me down, magnifies negative feelings" (SE3); "[Loneliness] makes me feel empty and awful in addition to making me reflect on myself in a negative light" (SE7); "[Loneliness is a] feeling of being inherently defective/different in some way. Being unable to talk to others about a shared experience because in communicating something essential gets withheld" (SE5); "[Loneliness is] not being able to genuinely connect with another person" (SE7); "I isolate myself more, assume that people don't want me around so I don't even try to be social, and I avoid going in to the office as much as I can" (SE6, English speaker); and one English participant described it elaboratively: "Loneliness to me is the feeling of not being part of a group of people or society at large. The feeling that the world evolves within that group, conversations are taking place, thoughts are expressed and shared, relations flourish and you are not part of it. Loneliness to me is the feeling of me versus all the others that have some kind of togetherness that I am being left out of. It is [a] sad feeling that drains energy. It is also easy to get suspicious and conspicuous of the people in that group that you are left out of (or society at large) … I feel low on energy, low on motivation and a bit adverse. Then what I do about it can differ. Sometimes I take care of it and get away from the loneliness and into the togetherness. Other times I get kind of angry and polarized and think that hey, they can have it without me" (SE10, English speaker). Although the sample is small, the English descriptions seem to resonate with my Swedish material. Similar to my Swedish research participants, the English-speaking participants captured how loneliness involves an unfulfilled desire for recognition and that this painful experience pulls the individual in two different directions.

workplace loneliness could benefit from comparing descriptions across languages to identify universal commonalities and cultural differences.

Beyond the abandoned methods mentioned here, I engaged in many larger and smaller theoretical and conceptual projects that never made it into the thesis. For example, at an early stage in my research process, I invested a lot of time into developing a theoretical framework based on philosophical anarchism and existentialism. I called it critical anarchism to distinguish it from political anarchism. Through this, I also wanted to problematize the dominating Marxist perspective in critical management literature (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2012; Paulsen, 2015; Graeber, 2018), as I believe Marxism (and Marx's concept of alienation) is ill-equipped to make sense of the subjective, emotional, and existential aspects of contemporary work. As a part of this project, I engaged in a literature review of Marxism to make my case. I then proceeded to analyze and discuss potential antecedents of workplace loneliness from an anarchist point of view.[151] But as I wanted to steer away from the positivist ambition of predicting and measuring loneliness, I abandoned this project too. Another philosopher and sociologist that has been influential to my way of thinking is Ferdinand Tönnies (1887/2011), specifically his concepts *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. In earlier versions of this thesis, these concepts were used to discuss and analyze different forms of social constellations and their link with alienation and loneliness. But this track was eventually cut in favor of other theories and concepts, although I still find Tönnies's ideas relevant in the context of workplace loneliness. This is something future research may want to pick up on.

In the end, it could be argued that this thesis does not say much new. What it does offer, however, are new ways to look at old things, such as motivation, control, in-group behavior, and antisocial tendencies in the workplace, all through the lens of loneliness. By this, I do not try to explain these phenomena but rather suggest that this experience called loneliness may interact with an array of social, interpersonal, and emotional processes in the workplace. Future research may want to consider if this broad approach benefits the grasping of loneliness in organizations or if a restrictive perspective is preferable.

[151] For example, anarchists are generally skeptical of hierarchy, division of labor, centralization, and social engineering (see Scott, 2012). Some argue that this causes alienated relationships that could lead to loneliness (see Bookchin, 1971: 151; Buber, 1942/2005:77-78).

Additional Opportunities for Future Research

A currently hot topic relevant to workplace loneliness is remote work and hybrid work. In Sweden, remote work has traditionally been uncommon; employers have expected their employees to be in the office every day and many workers were seemingly content with this, perhaps because it provided a clear separation between private life and work as well as offered joint social activities, such as fika and lunch yoga, in the office. In post-pandemic Sweden, many employers now allow hybrid work solutions: people are free to work from home a few days a week as long as they show up in the office on a regular basis. Although this rapid change somewhat problematizes my research, it possibly also makes the problem even more relevant. Drawing on my research, hybrid work solutions could potentially present greater challenges than full-time remote work: When everyone works from home, the situation is shared; however, when workers are free to choose whether they want to work from home or the office, there will inevitably be a split between those who maximize time at home and those who voluntarily come to the office. Consequently, although those who stay home may feel momentarily liberated, they will likely feel like relative outsiders once they return to the office. Drawing on my findings, this can inflict loneliness and further increase the desire for withdrawal. Managers and researchers need to be aware of this risk and explore how the adverse effects (for the individual and the group) can be mitigated. I believe my thesis offers a solid point of departure for this, but here is an opportunity for novel and valuable research.

Moreover, a common theme in this thesis is loneliness in leaders. Although I have argued that not all instances of loneliness need to be intervened, I do think loneliness in leaders is a situation that has to be taken seriously as manifestations of this could have detrimental effects on not only the individual leader but also the people she leads and the larger organization. Admittedly, this concern may be a remnant of my dwelling on anarchist theory; however, I do think future research may want to explore ways to reduce loneliness in leaders. Some possible approaches I can think of are co-leadership, leadership rotation, and self-organizing teams (no leaders). The latter is a common practice in Agile methodology, and it would be interesting to explore if this has any effect on reported loneliness. Considering the popularity of Agile, this is an excellent opportunity for future research and could be low-hanging fruit. Integrating research on Agile practices (and philosophy) with workplace emotion and loneliness research could open new ways to understand the benefits (or weaknesses) of Agile.

Finally, future research may want to test some of my propositions, such as the relationship between loneliness, recognition, and self-esteem, as well as whether loneliness can be exploited. As noted, this aligns with qualitative emotion in organization research, and I imagine it could be attractive from both a critical and positivist angle. This includes not only how organizations manage loneliness in

workers but also how workers potentially use their own loneliness. Similar to Hochschild's surface and deep acting, I can imagine some scenarios where people may benefit from fabricating loneliness.[152] Moreover, it would be interesting to investigate how remote work affects organizational control – Is the isolated (and perhaps lonely) remote worker easier or harder to manage? On the one hand, she is without peer support; on the other hand, she is liberated from surveillance and peer pressure. Here, my research sheds light on the complexities of the issue, but this topic demands more attention from management scholars and practicing managers.

[152] For example, a club hostess might act clingy and pretends to fear rejection and abandonment of a client. This vulnerability may produce feelings of superiority in the client. In other words, the hostess's fabricated fear of loneliness makes the client experience a kind of social pleasure: he feels desired and needed. Here, fabricating loneliness could be as simple as saying "I'll be lonely if you go" or "I'm so lonely when you're not around." The effect of this could be enhanced with submissive body language (which suggests that there might be some bodily movements associated with loneliness after all). Through this, a bond may be fabricated between the hostess and the client, which provides the client not only pleasure (recognition) in the moment but also feelings of guilt if he does not fulfill his part of the transactional relationship. Although this might be most effective where the expression of emotional intimacy is prohibited, it can be projected to other occupations that involve asymmetrical social interactions. For example, this tactic can be deployed to "suck up" to a boss, customer, or colleague. From this perspective, even though loneliness is not necessarily an expressive emotion, the fear of loneliness can be fabricated and communicated to manipulate others.[152] As far as I know, no previous research project has studied the fabrication of loneliness at work. It may not be easy to study, but creatively using interviews and observations of this phenomenon as it emerges could provide novel knowledge with far-reaching implications on work and organizational life.

Closing Words

In this thesis, I delve into the complexities of workplace loneliness, offering new insights into its various manifestations and coping mechanisms. I present three perspectives on why people feel lonely at work: social alienation, self-alienation, and unfulfilled expectations for recognition. The recognition perspective reframes loneliness as a desire for recognition and self-esteem, potentially guiding more effective coping strategies as well as interventions in the future. Moreover, this study emphasizes that categorizing emotions as positive or negative is an oversimplification and that any emotion can have both favorable and unfavorable outcomes depending on context. On this note, my research highlights the potential constructive role of loneliness in fostering adherence to social norms and self-discipline while also warning against the pitfalls of excessive conformity, such as self-alienation and shallow relationships.

In this final chapter, I discussed my study's conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and empirical limitations and identified opportunities for future research. In the end, I believe my research has brought new perspectives on loneliness to the table while expanding and deepening existing ones. Still, we are only scratching the surface of the complexity of human emotion (in and out of organizations). I find this infinitely fascinating and hope to remain a lifelong student of organizational behavior and employee experience. This marks the end of my research project. To those who have read this far, thank you for your time and interest. Knowing that someone has engaged with this thesis makes my journey feel a little less lonely. I also want to take the opportunity to thank once again everyone who has supported me on this endeavor. Although writing a dissertation is often lonely work, it cannot be done completely alone.

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Appendix

Concepts and Theories

This section of the appendix includes in-depth reviews of some of the concepts and theories that I have referred to in this thesis.

A.1. What Is an Emotion?

How emotions are perceived and appraised has changed dramatically over the past two centuries. In the 19th century, it was generally believed that emotions were produced by preceding mental states (see James, 1884). From this perspective, the mental state of anger would be the cause of spiking testosterone and dropping cortisol levels, which increases blood pressure and makes people aggressive (see Herrero et al., 2009; on what happens when we get upset). In other words, the classic belief implied that a cognitive activity preceded bodily expressions (both physiological and behavioral). This arguably casts emotions as moral objects, as it deems an individual responsible for her emotional behavior (good and bad). In 1884, however, William James challenged the traditional model by proposing a reversed causality: emotion is an automatic response to a situation, and the conscious evaluation of one's mental state, which may be called a feeling,[153] is subsequent (see also LeDoux, 1995, 2012; on emotions versus feelings). While this somewhat relieves the individual from the guilt of "bad" emotional behavior, it paints emotions as "irrational" and unpredictable as it implies that our emotional responses are not immediately under our control.

A few years before James, Charles Darwin (1872) proposed that emotions have universal evolutionary properties, shared by all humans. That is, despite their "volatility," emotions have a meaningful function. Darwin and James were harmonious on this point and saw emotions as involuntary expressions that made internal states public (see Barbalet, 1998: 111). Where they fell short, especially Darwin, was neglecting individual and cultural variances as well as in their consideration of how emotions are experienced and what triggers them. Darwin's interest lay solely in how an individual bodily expresses emotion as a part of a social communications system (Barbalet, 1998). While some accounts of Darwin's and James's theories are questionable by today's knowledge,[154] they have been highly influential to subsequent emotion theorists. By the second half of the 20th century, most scholars held the belief that emotional processes occur before cognitive ones

[153] Whereas emotions often have a corresponding feeling, feelings can be rooted in physical sensations, such as stomach pain and joint pain. For example, when we are "under the weather," we *feel* bad, and this feeling is not necessarily tied to an emotion.

[154] One questionable point of Darwin's theory of emotion is its emphasis on the universal expression of emotion. For example, Darwin (1872) believed that the emotion of grief was expressed by certain grief muscles that all human individuals possess (p. 185).

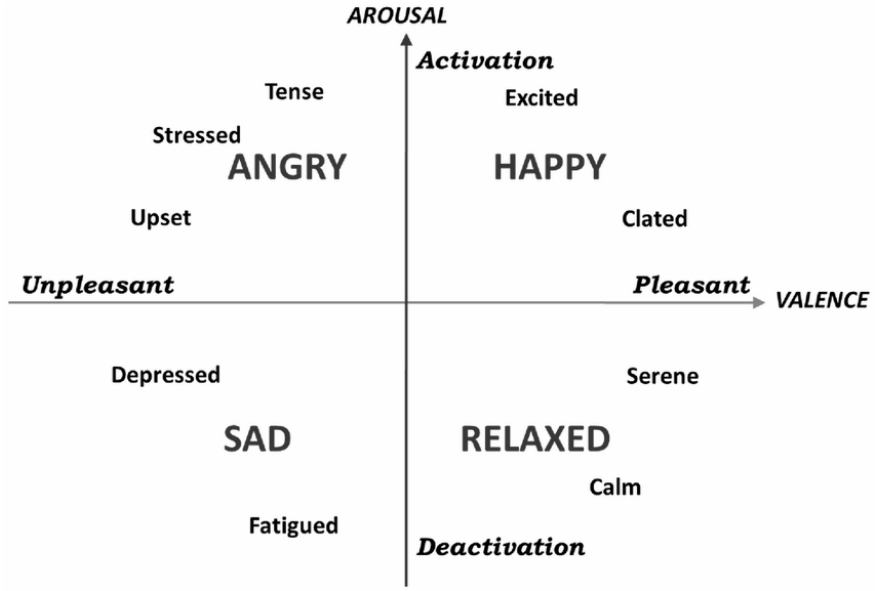
(see Zajonc, 1980; Bower, 1981).[155] However, over the last two decades, this perspective has become increasingly contested (see Frijda, Manstead, & Bem, 2000; Barrett, 2006a; Storbeck & Clore, 2008). Many contemporary emotion scholars tend to see emotional and cognitive processes as intertwined and mutually influencing each other.

As for what makes up an emotion, there are currently two prevailing perspectives: Discrete Emotions Theory and the Theory of Constructed Emotion. The first suggests that there exists an array of distinct emotions that do not overlap. For example, Tomkins (1962/1992) identify nine basic emotions: anger, fear, enjoyment, interest, surprise, distress, shame, dissmell, and disgust.[156] Building on this, Izard et al. (1993) claim that there are twelve discrete emotions–the emotions Tomkins's identifies (except for dissmell and distress) plus sadness, contempt, self-hostility, shyness, and guilt. This perspective may be considered a naturalist approach to emotions and a continuation of Darwin's theory, as it assumes that each core emotion has a unique neural circuit and is a product of biological evolution (see Moors, 2009). For example, discrete emotion scholars tend to point at the amygdala as the brain center that regulates the emotion fear (Colombetti, 2009). However, over the past few decades, this theory has faced increasing criticism, with detractors arguing that there is no evidence that discrete (i.e., basic) emotions exist (Barrett, 2006a; Barrett, Gendron, & Huang, 2009; see also Panksepp & Watt, 2011). Offering an alternative perspective, the Theory of Constructed Emotion (sometimes referred to as Conceptual Act Theory) argues that emotions are constructed from a wide range of physiological as well as cognitive activities (see Barrett, 2006a; Barrett et al., 2007; Moors, 2009). This model builds on Russell's (1980, 2003) Core Affect Theory, which also argues that emotions (e.g., anger, joy, and fear) are not directly tied to specific physiological states or responses but rather represent categorizations of sub-emotional processes (Moors, 2009). These sub-emotional processes may be referred to as affects (see Russell, 2003).

According to Russell's (1980) theory, basic affective states make up people's internal experiences. To illustrate this, Russell (1980) conceptualizes a matrix of opposing affective states along two axes: valence (pleasant versus unpleasant) and arousal (activation versus deactivation). At the edges of this matrix, a range of basic affective states can be placed, such as excitement, fatigue, stress, and satisfaction. Furthermore, emotions, as multidimensional constructs of these affective states, can be placed along the axes of the matrix. Below is an example from Valenza et al. (2014), which has mapped the emotional states of anger, happiness, sadness, and relaxation. When presented like this, Russell's Core Affect Theory may

[155] The difference between emotions and feelings also suggests that an emotion can be expressed without being felt. For example, we can laugh out of joy without consciously recognizing that we are happy: it is not until we stop to reflect on our situation that we think "I feel happy right now."
[156] Tomkins referred to these as affects, but today this is better understood as emotions.

superficially resemble Discrete Emotion Theory; however, Core Affect Theory does not focus on defining particular emotional constructs but emphasizes the affective dimensions (valence and arousal) of people's experiences. This model also illustrates that the boundaries between emotional experiences are not sharply defined. More importantly, unlike Discrete Emotion Theory, Core Affect Theory does not claim that basic emotional states have any corresponding brain circuit or physiological structure (see Barrett, 2006a).



From Valenza et al. (2014). Adapted from Russell's (1980) model of core affect.

A limitation of Russell's (1980) model, in terms of understanding emotions, is that it primarily focuses on the affective dimensions of emotional experience, which could be interpreted as a focus on the neurophysiological and psychological components. However, Barrett's (2006) Constructed Emotions Theory expands this understanding by considering other activities such as language, conceptualization, and evaluation as also involved in how emotions are constructed:

> Although core affect can have noncognitive causes (e.g. diurnal rhythms, hormonal changes, satiety or hunger, pharmacological agents, too much or too little sleep, etc.…) changes in core affect largely result from the process of valuation (Barrett, 2006: 31).

In other words, emotions, according to the constructed emotions perspective, are influenced by perception and expectations, both of which are to some extent social in origin. Elaborating on this, Moors (2008) argue that any concept of emotion not only should consider emotions on a physiological, phenomenal (experience), and

cognitive level but also should consider their motivational and expressive dimensions. This effectively consolidates the more deterministic perspectives of emotion with the constructed view for an integral model of emotion. Many contemporary evolutionary biologists share this view by arguing that emotion is a communications system with both internal and external functions (see Shariff & Tracy, 2011; Van Kleef, 2009).

As for how emotions manifest, they can be expressed with gestures, posture, touch, vocalization, tone, pitch of voice, and more (Sauter, 2010). For example, happiness – broadcast through a smile, squinting eyes, and an open posture – communicates a lack of perceived threat (Preuschoft & van Hoof, 1997). Anger – broadcast through frowning eyebrows, visible teeth, and an alerted posture – communicates dominance and/or a perceived threat (Marshe et al., 2005; Wilkowski & Meier, 2010). While some emotional facial expressions seem to be innate (see Matsumoto & Willingham, 2009),[157] it has also been observed that human children raised by wild animals do not learn to smile or laugh as a sign of happiness (Malson, 1972: 49). This suggests that people are to some extent socialized into how they express emotions and that there might be no universal expression of a particular emotion.[158] On this, Fehr and Russell (1984) argue that being a part of a culture means understanding the cultural scripts for emotions. While this denies Darwin's under-socialized perspective of emotions, it may also lead to an over-socialized understanding of emotions as completely culturally and socially constructed, which would be equally neglectful. The Theory of Constructed Emotion aims to solve this by integrating the physiological (evolutionary) and social (cultural) aspects of emotion.

On the motivational dimension of emotions, Frijda (2017) argues that positive (pleasurable) and negative (unpleasurable) affects are defined by their capacity to increase or decrease an individual's interaction with an object (p. 31). In other words, a positive affect typically promotes proximity-seeking behavior toward an object (and repeated interaction), while a negative affect encourages distance to an object (and decreased interaction). This may be compared with physical pain and pleasure. From a motivational perspective, pain itself is not necessarily bad: it has reasonably evolved to help the individual avoid what is harmful. That said, seeing humans as hard-wired to seek pleasure and avoid pain is arguably a simplification

[157] Matsumoto and Willingham (2009) argue that since blind people express emotions similarly to sighted individuals, this suggests that certain facial expressions are innate and not visually learned. That said, it is possible that the scripts for emotional expressions are transferred in ways other than just than visual cues. For example, a smile makes a certain sound and a smiling face can be perceived through touch. In other words, a blind child/person could learn to smile without knowing what it looks like.

[158] It could also be that feral children are emotionally "unlearned" – i.e., otherwise innate emotional expressions have been overridden. Either way, this suggests that culture and upbringing influence how emotions are expressed.

as sometimes pain can be pleasurable and pleasure can be painful. Elaborating on emotions and motivation, Frijda (2017) suggests that emotional behavior tends to be shaped by relational goals (p. 27). That is, although emotional behavior is often impulsive, it possesses intentionality toward modifying a relationship. For example, expressing sadness may promote social safety, expressing happiness may increase social status, and expressing anger may remove a social threat. Ultimately, emotions both motivate actions and help people navigate the social and material world (see Frijda, Manstead, & Bem., 2000; Frijda & Mesquita, 1994). Once again, this line of thinking converges with Darwin. Considering the motivational and expressive dimensions of emotions, even negative emotions must be seen to have a constructive function. Despite this, many 20th-century scholars view emotions as volatile and unnatural.

Epitomizing this attitude, psychologist Paul Young (1943/2013) argues that "Emotion is an acute disturbance of the individual as a whole, psychological in origin, involving behavior, conscious experience, and visceral functioning". Similarly, William Marston (1928), a psychologist and the inventor of the lie detector, concludes that "I do not regard you as a 'normal person' [. . .] when you are suffering from fear, rage [. . .] or any other emotional state whatsoever containing turmoil and conflict" (p. 1–2). Twentieth-century classical organization and management scholars (e.g., Taylor, 1911/2014; Fayol, 1916/1987; Weber,[159] 1922; and Simon, 1947) all believe emotions are irrational and therefore should be eliminated or tamed in the workplace. From this perspective, predictability is a virtue, and the erratic nature of emotions makes them dangerous. However, with the gradual shift from the modernist preference for rationality, objective truth, and order to subjective experience and cultural relativism,[160] more nuanced perspectives of emotions have emerged. This movement is reviewed in Chapter 2.

[159] Critiquing of the modernist view of organizations, Weber (1922/2013) makes the following claim: "Bureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is 'dehumanized,' the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation" (p. 975). His opinion toward the rationalization of organizational life is more visible in his concept "the Iron Cage" (see Weber, 1905/2014). His pessimistic outlook is also clear in his depiction of the future of the capitalist society as a "polar night of icy darkness" (Weber, 1994).

[160] This is not just a purely ideological shift, as contemporary science has also challenged the idea of human rationality. For example, neuroscientist Damasio (2005) has demonstrated that emotions are just as rational (or irrational) as any other behavior and inseparable from higher cognitive activities such as language and decision-making (see also Damasio, 2010). From this perspective, humans are emotional beings, not rational beings. Emotions are only perceived as irrational because they are not as transparent as cognitive processes. It has also been argued that emotions are perceived as complex because they are always in process of becoming (Barbalet, 1998). In other words, there is no clear beginning or end of an emotion or emotional episode, unlike a thought or an utterance. This contributes to the difficulty of defining an emotional (or affective) state (see Kupers & Weibler, 2008).

To further define "emotion" by distinction, one needs to differentiate between emotions, moods, and personality types. First, a mood may be understood as a more stable and generalized state than an emotion, although still temporary (Rusting, 1998). For example, one may be in an irritable mood because of a bad night's sleep, low blood sugar, or suffering from a poor internet connection. Although emotions can last for up to two hours (Verduyn et al., 2009), moods can persist for days. When a negative affective state lasts longer, it may be classed as a disorder. For example, prolonged sadness and anxiety may be diagnosed as persistent depressive disorder (WebMD, 2018). Second, biological and social differences between individuals make people experience and express various intensities and frequencies of affective states and emotions (Calkins, 1994). These differences may be categorized as personality traits and are continual in contrast to moods and emotions (Rusting, 1998). The final terms that should be mentioned are emotional intelligence and empathy. Emotional intelligence, popularized by Goleman (1996), has been conceptualized as the ability to connect thoughts to emotions (Mayer & Geher, 2002), to relate to one's empathic ability, and to regulate, use, appraise, and express emotions (Salovey & Mayer, 1989: 189). Empathy can be defined as the ability to experience someone else's emotions as one's own emotions (Davis, 1995: 12). One's empathic ability may vary depending not only on individual differences but also on the social relationship (Becchetti, Antoni, & Faillo, 2011) and the physical and social environment (Stuijfzand et al., 2016).

Although I have covered some central aspects of emotion research, the vastness of the field could easily fill several dissertations. One important topic that remains to be discussed is the complex relationship between experienced and expressed emotions. Both James and Darwin perceive emotions as "corporeal" (i.e., having distinct bodily expressions); however, James acknowledges that this model fails to encompass all emotional phenomena. He refers to these non-expressive emotional phenomena as "cerebral emotions," distinct from "standard emotions," which have identifiable physical expressions (James, 1884: 19; see also Prinz, 2003: 5). Similar "non-expressive" emotions have been termed "abstract emotions" in contemporary management research (e.g., Johnsen, 2016). This dichotomy implies the existence of two sets of emotions: "standard/corporeal" and "cerebral/abstract." However, this model does not fully explain the interplay between expressed and experienced emotions, such as the relationship between expressed sadness and the actual experience of sadness.

Scholars aligned with Constructed Emotions Theory suggest that there is no direct relationship between experienced and expressed emotion. In other words, experienced emotions are not necessarily expressed, and expressed emotions are not necessarily experienced (Barrett, 2006a). According to this perspective, experienced and expressed emotions follow two separate categorization processes: an experienced emotion is recognized based on a person's internal (affective) state,

whereas expressed emotion is recognized by another person based on the individual's (social) behavior (Barrett, 2006a).[161] This challenges the notion that certain emotions are corporeal (i.e., bodily) and basic and other emotions are cerebral and abstract, as even corporeal and basic emotions may be experienced without being expressed. As noted in Chapter 1, this complexity makes studying emotions incredibly difficult, and scholars may have to choose between studying the expression or experience of emotion or the relationship between the two. However, it is important to avoid the oversimplification of assuming that an expressed emotion directly correlates with an experienced emotion. In this thesis, I offer a novel perspective that addresses this problem.

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In this section, I have demonstrated that there is no universally agreed-upon model of emotion and that perspectives have gradually evolved over time. These range from relatively one-dimensional theories that view human emotions as either primarily determined by internal biological factors or largely shaped by social and environmental influences, to more integrative approaches that consider multiple dimensions. These dimensions include physiological, experiential, cognitive, motivational, and expressive aspects, as well as the internal, external, and situational triggers for emotional episodes. However, when researching emotions empirically, there is inevitably a degree of selection involved in how emotion is conceptualized, or at least a delimitation of the dimensions to focus on. The perspectives with which I align in my own research are discussed in the main body of this thesis.

[161] In simple terms, a person is recognized as angry when she seems angry, but this does not mean that she feels angry. Meanwhile, a person feeling angry does not mean that she appears angry.

A.2. Is the Swede Human?

When distinguishing modes of isolation, Swedish is less nuanced than English. For example, *ensam* can be translated as both lonely and alone, *ensamhet* can be translated as loneliness, aloneness, and solitude, and *integritet* can be translated as privacy (although the distinction between privacy and integrity is lost). In theory, there is a distinction between *att vara själv*[162] (to be alone) and *att vara ensam* (to be lonely); however, in everyday usage, there is little separation between these phrases in Swedish. Rather, the context in which *ensam* is used determines its meaning: *vara ensam* implies being alone and *känna sig ensam* suggests feeling lonely–e.g., *jag trivs med att vara ensam* (I enjoy being alone) and *jag känner mig ensam* (I feel lonely). However, even these distinctions can sometimes blur in everyday usage. In addition, Swedes often speak of voluntary and involuntary *ensamhet* perhaps to distinguish between solitude and loneliness. In the following section, beyond acknowledging the linguistic limitations in Swedish, I will briefly review Swedish history and culture to provide additional context to the empirical material in this thesis.

***

Sweden has a long history as a farming nation. By granting free farmers autonomy, the Swedish Crown maintained a strong relationship with the peasants (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2006/2015: 51). While other European monarchies fell at the hands of aristocrats and the bourgeoisie, the alliance between the Swedish monarch and its subjects effectively neutralized any attempt to overthrow the Crown (Therborn, 1989: 24). The result is a Swedish history with few internal conflicts and relatively peaceful class struggles (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2006/2015: 18). As for external conflicts, Sweden has historically been spared, possibly because of its location on a cold peninsula, which is out of sight of empire-building nations (ibid). Sweden has also strategically remained neutral in international conflicts since the early 19th century.[163] This has created a calm and protected environment where people have had the time and opportunity to focus on themselves. However, this peculiar history has also potentially created a peculiar kind of people.

In 1946, Sanfrid Neander-Nilsson, a Swedish archaeologist and author, published *Är Svensken Människa?* (*Is the Swede Human?*). In this book, Neander-Nilsson criticizes Swedes for being shy, boring, and fearful of people. Although this may

[162] That said, sometimes *själv* implies independence rather the state of being alone. For example, a child may say correctly "jag borstade tänderna själv" (I brushed my teeth on my own) to emphasize that the activity was carried out independent of a parent's help. This is correct phrasing even if a parent is standing next to the child as the brushing took place. In this context, it may be clearer to say "jag borstade tänderna ensam" if the activity was performed without a parent next to the child.

[163] The last war Sweden officially engaged was the Swedish-Norwegian war in 1814. Whether Sweden has truly been neutral since then has been disputed.

seem a harsh critique, these attributes, depending on cultural values, can also be seen as qualities. Elaborating on Neander-Nilsson's assessment, Swedish historians Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh (2006/2015) wrote the book *Är Svensken Människa? Gemenskap och oberoende i det moderna Sverige* (*Is the Swede Human? Togetherness and independence in modern Sweden*), where they emphasize the paradoxical aspects of Swedes and their culture. According to Berggren and Trägårdh, Swedes have a unique answer to the individualism-collectivism conundrum, a solution that maximizes liberty without jeopardizing the moral order of society (ibid: 21). And this "Swedish Way" did not sprout from nowhere; *det svenska folkhemmet* (The Swedish Welfare State) was carefully designed.[164]

For example, in the 1970s, the Social Democrats, the party in power, presented a socialist family program that sought to make Swedes independent–i.e., women were to be liberated from men, the child from the parent, the employee from the employer, and the citizen from the community (*Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Kvinnoförbund*, 1978). In the 1980s, the Swedish Social Board explicitly phrased the mission of youth recreation centers "to liberate children from their dependency on adults" (*Socialstyrelsen*, 1985). Two decades later, the "World Value Survey" showed that Swedes were the most emancipated people on earth (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2006/2015: 82). Apparently, individualism had rapidly advanced in Sweden; an extraordinary change considering that collectivism had characterized most of 20th-century Sweden (Rosengren, 2013: 253). The Swedish people were now liberated, but it was not necessarily a political (or existential) freedom but a "freedom from other people," a freedom that was made possible only through increased dependency on the state. Berggren and Trägårdh (2006/2015) called the phenomenon "state-individualism": a combination of strong collectivism and even stronger individualism (p. 22). The authors elaborated that in the context of state-individualism, behavior and values that other cultures deem alienating, irresponsible, and antisocial are reconstructed as solidarity, safety, and equality (p. 23).

Berggren and Trägårdh (2006/2015) contrasted Sweden to the US and Germany. Whereas American society is built on the relationship between the individual and the family and German society is built on the relationship between the family and the state, Swedish is based on an alliance between the individual and the state (p. 80). Berggren and Trägårdh suggest that the political argument for state-individualism is that only when mutual dependencies are eliminated, genuine and autonomous love and friendship can emerge. They call this the Swedish Theory of

[164] Note the translation of *folkhem* to "welfare (state)"; *folkhem* literally translates to "people-home".

Love (p. 67).[165] However, once liberated from one another, Swedes' dependency on the state increases. In other words, Swedes were never liberated as interpersonal dependency was traded for bureaucratic dependency.[166]

In 1989, Swedish ethnographer Åke Daun, in his book *Svensk Mentalitet* (*Swedish Mentality*), further illustrates what kind of person the Swedish state-individualism has produced. Daun (1989) echoed Neander-Nilsson's assessment of Swedes as shy, reserved, withdrawn, stiff, and hesitant to speak with strangers (p. 46). For Daun, however, the Swede was a misunderstood creature: "A reason why Swedes are perceived as 'complacent' is their relative taciturnity, the tendency to rather listen than speak' (p. 31, my translation). He elaborates that in Swedish culture a quiet person is perceived as insightful, philosophical, disciplined, and humble (p. 55). According to Daun, the Swedish feudal system has institutionalized indebtedness in Swedish culture (p. 65). For many, this indebtedness is a burden that motivates a desire for withdrawal and independence – in other words, solitude (p. 73). The Swedish *sommarstuga* or *landställe* (summer cottage/cabin or country place) is an example of how Swedes temporarily escape society to find peace. Sweden also has the highest percentage of single households in the world (Eurostat, 2017). Daun explains that in Swedish culture "aloneness/solitude [*ensamhet*] offers relief and liberation. It gives relaxation from social expectations [. . .] the absence of social pressure and pressure to speak and conform" (p. 76, my translation). This strong desire for solitude may be a product of the encroaching relationship between the individual and the state (society).

Although Sweden has one of the lowest levels of reported loneliness in Europe (d'Hombres et al., 2021), Swedes' tendency to withdraw and isolate themselves may be an expression of their loneliness. On this note, Japanese sociologists understand *hikikomori* (self-isolation) as a way for Japanese people to opt out of the harsh and competitive social climate in Japan (Sekimizu, 2019). For people who practice *hikikomori*, it is potentially less painful to be alone than to be lonely in a repressive crowd. The same may be speculated about Swedes. This brings the definition of loneliness into question. Swedes may not identify as lonely and therefore do not categorize their experiences as loneliness due to linguistic limitations and cultural values. As mentioned, Swedes do not even have a word to adequately describe their loneliness, and some theories suggest that language influences the way people think and feel (e.g., Sapir-Whorf hypothesis). Interestingly, the highest levels of reported loneliness can instead be found in "culturally warm" countries in southern Europe

[165] A documentary with the same name has been made. Berggren and Trädgårdh's *Swedish Theory of Love* should not be confused with this movie.

[166] A parallel can be made with feudal Sweden: the aristocrats were self-sufficient, and their independence posed a threat to the Royal House, so the Swedish Monarch established a strong relationship with the pawns by liberating them from the aristocrats but also from each other. Consequently, the pawns became dependent on the King, so the King could mobilize them as a protection against domestic and international threats.

(d'Hombres et al., 2021) where rejection and abandonment are potentially more painful (and dangerous) as people depend on mutual support rather than on state welfare. However, which nationality is truly the loneliest ultimately boils down to how the phenomenon is defined. The Swedish mentality could be a blessing, but it could also be a curse: when aloneness is romanticized, loneliness is simultaneously assessed through the same lens. In other words, loneliness might be even more difficult to deal with in a setting such as the Swedish culture because of the synonymous relationship between solitude and loneliness and the stigma attached to a fear of *ensamhet*. This could lead to disorientation and shame.

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Although the limitations of the Swedish language make a discussion on loneliness difficult to isolate, people may have developed a more nuanced vocabulary to describe the phenomenon. For example, in the Swedish translation of The Beatles' song "Eleanor Rigby" performed by Monica Zetterlund, the famous line "All the lonely people, where do they all come from?" in translated to "Alla vilsna människor, var kommer dom ifrån?" ("All the lost people, where do they come from?"). This is not a change in meaning, but a necessary interpretation, because the Swedish word *ensam* does not reflect what the original lyrics convey. Another Swedish artist, Susanne Alfvengren (1988), once sang "*Det är nog bättre med ensam ensamhet än ensam när man är två*" ("It's probably better with alone loneliness than loneliness when you are two"). Alfvengren's lyrics highlight the unique pain of experiencing loneliness even when near another person, implying the particular anguish of feeling lonely within a romantic relationship.

The Swedish pop-rock singer Jocke Berg (from Kent, 1990–2016) also wrote numerous songs on loneliness. One of them reads, "*Du måste kunna ensamhet om du vill förstå en annan människa*" ("You must know aloneness/loneliness if you want to know another person"). This song emphasizes the existential and social aspects of aloneness and/or loneliness. The same song concludes with "*men även ensamhet förändras när åren går till en annan sorts ensamhet"* ("but even aloneness/loneliness changes when years pass to another kind of aloneness/loneliness"), which implies that persistent loneliness changes people and this change is not necessarily a positive one.[167] It could also mean that what was once pleasurable solitude gradually shifts into painful loneliness. The contemporary pop group *Den Svenska Björnstammen* (The Swedish Bear Tribe) has also written about experiences of loneliness and solitude. In 2021, they released the song *Att*

[167] Another song written by Berg reads, "*Jag vill inte vara ensam, men vem vill vara ensam*?" ("I don't want to be alone/lonely, but who wants to be alone/lonely?"). The meaning in Berg's words here is ambiguous: Is he referring to aloneness or loneliness? Since his other writings emphasize the potential pleasures of being alone, it may be assumed that *ensam* in this context refers to loneliness. See also Kent's song *Ensamheten* from 2009, which captures the frustrating nature of loneliness/aloneness.

vara själv och inte ensam alls (To be alone but not lonely at all), which emphasizes the pleasures of being alone, but the lyrics also deal with the fact that isolation can lead to dark thoughts. On a different note, echoing Nietzsche's sentiment that the greatest person is the one who can be most lonely, pop artist Thomas Stenström sang "*Tack vare det ni är. Tack vare allt ni gör. Så är jag ensammast I stan. [. . .] Tack vare det ni är. Tack vare allt ni gör. Är jag den starkaste i stan*" ("Thanks to what you are. Thanks to all that you do. I am loneliest in the city. [. . .] Thanks to what you are. Thanks to all that you do. I am strongest in the city"). Here, Stenström suggests that the way others treat him causes his loneliness, but his ability to endure this loneliness also makes him strong. This sentiment resonates with the Swedish proverb "*ensam är stark*", which can be translated in a Nietzschean manner as "lonely is strong".

Meanwhile, one of the earliest mentions of loneliness in Swedish literature is by the 18th -century poet Olof con Dalin (1708-1763), who wrote "*O tysta ensamhet, var ska jag nöjen finna? Bland sorg som ingen vet skall mina dar förrinna. En börda tung som sten mig möter vart jag går. Bland tusen finns knappt en, som kärlek rätt förstår*" ("O silent loneliness, where shall I pleasures find? Among sorrow no one knows my days shall disappear. A burden heavy like stone meets me wherever I go. Among thousand exists barely one, who love properly understands"). This poem captures the pain of emotional and intellectual isolation. In the same poem, Dalin directs his loneliness toward an individual whom he loves. However, he fears this person will not accept him, leading him to associate his loneliness with a fear of rejection.

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In summary, in cultures and languages where loneliness is a distinct and commonly used term, people may be more likely to label themselves as lonely or to identify explicitly with loneliness. This linguistic distinction can facilitate conversations about loneliness even if it does not necessarily simplify understanding the concept. In contrast, due to the ambiguity of the Swedish term *ensam*, individuals may be more inclined to describe their experiences in alternative ways. This distinct perspective makes Swedish narratives on loneliness a phenomenological (and phenomenographic) treasure trove. Despite these nuances, Swedish culture shares key characteristics with other individualistic societies such as in the US and the UK. Consequently, insights derived from Swedish empirical materials can potentially offer valuable contributions to a broader Americo-European context.

Empirical Material and Procedure

E.1. Interview Questions and Survey Structure

Interview Questions

1) How did you end up at your current workplace? In addition, how have the workplace and your work assignments evolved over time?
2) Tell me what makes you feel lonely at work.
3) Can you tell me about a particular situation that made you feel lonely at work?
4) Please describe how it felt during and after the situation you described above.
    a) What did you do after the situation?
    b) What did you think after the situation?
    c) Was there anything you wanted to do, but didn't?
    d) Is there anything you regret?
    e) How do you think others involved may have interpreted the situation?
5) What does loneliness mean to you?
6) Who are you when you are/feel lonely?
7) How does loneliness (or the potential fear of loneliness) affect you?
8) Do you think managers should take responsibility for workers' loneliness?
    a) Why and how?
9) Do you think you have done something to make others feel lonely at work?
    a) Can you give an example?

Structure for Survey A

1) Describe an event, a period, or situation at work (or in another social situation such as a sports club or charity organization) where you have experienced feelings that you think may be related to loneliness. What happened? What did you do? What did you think? What did you feel? Try not to rationalize or explain something you have realized retrospectively but focus on retelling the situation as you remember experiencing it. Imagine that you are writing a chapter for your autobiography. You choose how wide a timespan you want to retell, and how much depth you want to share.
2) Feel free to reflect more generally upon the phenomenon "loneliness" (at work). What is it? Why does it happen? Here you are also free to write about your impressions of other people's struggles with and expressions of loneliness.
3) Reflect on your own development. What did the situation you described above teach you? How do you look back at the event/period/situation today? (Optional)

Structure for Survey B

1) What does workplace loneliness mean to you?
2) Describe your job (or earlier occupation where you have felt lonely).
3) Recount what makes you feel lonely at work.
4) Describe an event, episode, or context at work where you have experienced loneliness. What happened? What did you do? What did you think? What did you feel?
5) How does workplace loneliness (or a possible fear of loneliness) affect you?
6) Is there anything else about workplace loneliness that you would like to share?

E.2. A Netnographic Case

The following narrative was gathered through the netnographic study, where an anonymous individual shared her/his story online, available for public viewing. I translated it from Swedish to English, and I added interpretative notes in brackets for clarity. Through this narrative, I highlight the richness of netnographic data and the insightful conclusions that can be derived from it.

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I started at my current job about a year ago, which is an admin role at a school. Occasionally, there is an extreme amount of work to get done [. . .] especially when school is about to start, I barely have time to eat, and as I have my own office, I have become completely isolated.

It [the job] started well. My colleagues were very welcoming and asked if I wanted to join for AW [afterwork], but, unfortunately, I had to down-prioritize most AWs and parties because I was too tired, traveling, had something else booked, or I was ill.

For a long time, I was about to quit because I felt exploited by my boss (almost burnt out). Therefore, I put less effort into socializing with my colleagues because I thought I was going to leave anyway. It got better, but now I am instead completely ostracized, and turning this around feels like shit.

When I entered the staff room the other day, the teachers were having a gathering and it was clear that I was not invited. I fetched a few papers and stuff and since they were all there, I figured I would socialize a little. I started talking with them and they seemed to be interested at first and listened, but then there was one who started talking about something else and everyone turned around and listened to him as I was still talking. [It] didn't feel good but I didn't make a thing of it; I just took my stuff and left.

When I meet them [the teachers] alone in the corridor, they are nice even if I notice a big difference among some. Furthermore, I am, in my position, dependent on the teachers' direct help (for example, collection of information from students), and there are a few who have completely disregarded this responsibility. I don't know if it has anything to do with me, but it wouldn't surprise me [if it did].

Now my isolation has become cemented, and I sit 90% of the time in my office with the door closed. I NEVER eat with my colleagues, never join social gatherings, no interaction with them whatsoever except exchanging a few words with them in the corridor. I know with 99% certainty that they talk about me [behind my back]

because they have turned silent a few times when I have entered the staff room to get coffee. [. . .] It's not like I feel invited to sit down when they barely say hello. I know at least three teachers who talk shit [about others]. I sat [with them] once and they talked so much shit about the principal as a person, and when he entered [the room], they [transformed] and were super friendly with him. A couple of other administrative workers have also been shit-talked [behind their back], of which one I know was really hurt [by it]. Otherwise, people are nice, and it is just a small clique of people who talk badly [about others].

Otherwise, I am a nice [person] with a positive attitude, am helpful, and the emails I write [. . .] are always friendly (although I never get any responses). Furthermore, I do my absolute best and really try to satisfy everyone. But it is so damn difficult now to go to work because I am so lonely and even the students recognize this. [. . .] Anyway, what would you have done? The thing is that I am not planning on working there longer than next summer and then I want to move. [. . .] If that weren't the case, I would have quit immediately. [. . .] Damn, I have this severe anxiety every time I go to work now. I just want to sit in my office so that I don't have to meet my colleagues.

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This narrative mirrors the story from the school curator (Vignette #2) while echoing the sentiments of many other research participants. The individual associates experienced loneliness with a lack of appreciation or recognition in the workplace and perceives any friendliness between colleagues as insincere. However, there is also an awareness that the situation is largely self-inflicted, suggesting that things might have been different if initial invitations for social activities had not been declined. This implies that socializing beyond work duties may be vital to fully integrate into the work group.

E.3. My Loneliness

To conclude this dissertation, I include a short autobiographical vignette of my personal relationship with loneliness. This is intended to provide the reader with greater insight into how my personal experiences have influenced my interpretation of the empirical material. This section was originally a segment of a more extensive autoethnographic project that I carried out midway through the doctoral program. In the current format, it is a bit fragmented and structured to mirror my analysis of why people feel lonely at work (Chapter 6). It consists of three sections: the fear of being abandoned, the burden of being together, and my challenges with being a doctoral student. These vignettes will include both reflections on my childhood and past work experiences.

The Fear of Being Abandoned

I have always been a competitive person. From the ages of four to ten, I often raced my cousins around our family cabin. Since I was the eldest, I always won. But winning was not enough. I needed to outclass the others to feel like my position was secure. This drive to excel has been a defining characteristic of my childhood. Another example is when my fourth-grade teacher introduced public scoreboards. She awarded us a star for each assignment we completed, and I had the most stars. But just as with the cousin race, leading was not enough. When someone closed in on me, the teacher would comment "soon you won't have the most stars, Markus." And so, I quickly rushed through the assignments to stay on top. I wasn't concerned about learning; for me, it was more important to keep the leading spot; otherwise, I would risk being left behind.

Admittedly, my behavior as a child was somewhat unconventional. I was socially tone-deaf, unable to recognize many social cues and barriers that seemed obvious to others. This led me to often say and do socially awkward things. When I think back on my childhood, I recall my classmates treating me differently, as if they knew I was "special". The kids who had issues with me were those who were different themselves. While most kids my age were kind to me and I was accepted in almost any social group, I never felt like I belonged anywhere. I used to think of myself as a socially homeless person moving from group to group during recess: accepted by many, belonging to none.

Fast forward ten years and my first job was an assistant managerial internship at a prestigious media production company in Stockholm. Coming straight out of university, I had to adapt quickly. This was a rough transition for me. As the only intern in the 300-person company, I had no one to share my experiences with. It made me feel extremely isolated, and I suffered from mental exhaustion daily. I recall struggling to stay focused on a single task, with my vision blurred half the time. But I could not show this weakness to my colleagues or superiors. I still had

to prove myself worthy of a permanent position after the internship. The uncertainty of what would happen when the internship ended was the worst part. It felt like being on death row, not knowing when the day would come, but still hoping for salvation. The others cracked jokes about how they would celebrate my departure after I was gone like how funerals are held after a person has passed. To them it was a joke, to me it meant demise. I still joined the laughter, of course.

Five months into the internship, I was beginning to find my feet in the organization. However, one week, while the senior manager I was assisting was on vacation, a different manager attempted to shift the direction of the project. While I was in no position to oppose him, I advised the team leaders on the project to not go ahead with any radical changes before the senior manager had a chance to sign them off. They understood the situation and agreed. The next day, the rogue manager stood over my desk, screaming at the top of his lungs, his face tomato red. Apparently, it was unacceptable for "someone like me" to attempt to undermine him. I didn't quite understand; I just sat there and absorbed his fury. I later learned that one of the team leaders, who had agreed with me the other day, had told a story where I had forbidden team leaders to speak with the rogue manager (as if I even had the authority to deliver such an order). No, I had been thrown under the bus. As a result, everyone in the office watched as I was verbally abused by the manager, who was more than twice my age. No one batted an eye – they all stared deeply into their monitors, finding relief in the fact that they were not in my shoes. I felt abandoned and lonely, because I realized that no one had my back; no one would come to my aid when I needed it the most. Neither did I have the confidence to stand up for myself.

When the senior manager returned and was briefed on the series of events, he didn't acknowledge my efforts, not with a single word, even though I had inadvertently prevented a major deviation from the project plan. A few days later, another team leader told me: "You did the right thing, Markus, but it was unwise to get involved." In hindsight, I wonder if everyone knew that the rogue manager was going to deviate from the plan. Perhaps it was part of a larger scheme that the senior manager was involved in to deceive even higher-level management, and my unawareness of this had caused unnecessary trouble for everyone. This reminded me of when I was the socially awkward kid at school. I felt stupid, embarrassed, and lonely. And I feared I had messed up so badly I would soon be terminated.

The Burden of Being Together

In fifth grade, I got laryngitis – inflammation of the vocal cords. This happened at a time when my voice was deepening naturally, and so it destroyed my voice box. Like many boys this age, I was also suffering from excessive hand perspiration and warts. This combination made social interactions insufferable. I could not talk to

people because I had no voice, and I could not shake their hands because mine were like warty flounders. While my social tone-deafness was slowly improving, I was now socially mute. This led me to develop a near-superhuman ability to scan the environment. When I spotted a familiar silhouette in the distance, my heart raced, my fingers grew numb, and I walked in the other direction or pretended not to have seen the other person. Interaction was simply too painful.

My teenage years are hazy. Not because of booze, but because I spent most of them in online virtual worlds. School had failed to stimulate me, and I could not tolerate party life, so I sought challenges elsewhere. Games like World of Warcraft, Halo, and Guitar Hero offered refined reward systems. In these worlds, my performance and investment were directly correlated with a number next to my name. Few others could beat me; I felt safe. Interestingly, my skills there also began to earn me popularity in the real world. Suddenly, people were impressed and wanted me around. At first, I saw this as an opportunity to blend in, but then I realized that the newly gained affection was conditional: I needed to continuously surpass expectations to maintain their approval. At least that's what I thought. And so, social membership and interactions once again became a burden.

I was also an early adopter when Facebook launched in Sweden. It was during my first year of high school and I was excited about this new social game. I saw this as an opportunity to establish a new identity for myself, maybe as the "cool" or "funny" guy. But to my dismay, I was terrible at it. For the first time in my life, I failed to excel at something that I had invested myself in. Everyone knew exactly what to post, but my posts were awkward, and I was no longer cushioned by my sympathetic classmates. The online social world was harsh, and I felt like a loser. As a competitive spirit, I did the only thing I thought reasonable: I opted out of the game and deleted my Facebook account. I found relief – I was free from a race I could not win. The downside was that I fell out of contact with almost everyone I knew, but I also found this quite comfortable because now I could be myself, completely.

As my internship at the media production company was nearing its end, I was terrified of being thrown out into the cold. I knew I had been given a unique opportunity that I must not waste. So, to maximize my chances of survival, I shoe-horned myself into the image of their ideal employee: I worked harder than anyone else, I never said no, I never took a sick day, and I never complained. Two months later, my efforts bore fruit: I was hired. But I had set the bar too high for myself. For the next two years at the company, I continued to work extra, take no sick days, accept any requests, and make no complaints. I even worked on vacation days and during weekends. I did all this to get validation from my superiors – confirmation that they had made the right choice to hire me. As a byproduct, I was quite successful in the company. I became the youngest team leader ever, and my

responsibilities steadily grew. But with this, the gap between me and my colleagues grew. I had transitioned from a peer to a boss, and in my mind, bosses weren't friends. This mindset prevented me from showing vulnerability and admitting loneliness to my team or superiors. Because I was not safe, I felt like a kid pretending to be an adult, terrified for being discovered as an imposter. It was tough, but necessary for me to maintain my position. And so, I built an impenetrable façade. Yet, behind this wall, I was profoundly lonely, a loneliness exacerbated by the fact that I had become estranged even from myself.

Looking at this from another angle, it seems that my fear of being rejected is what made togetherness so burdensome in the first place. Interestingly, I quite admired the persona I had created during that time. I was confident, composed, and compassionate. Almost everyone liked me, and I was treated like a golden boy. But the self-alienation and emotional isolation were too much. I was stressed and exhausted. I developed sleep issues, and all I wanted was to put this life behind me and move to an isolated farm where I could be myself again, completely. But I was trapped in a prison I had made for myself. In the end, I was laid off because the company had run into financial issues. Despite being three years in the organization, I was the most recently hired team leader, and according to Swedish employment laws, I had to go. But maybe that was for the best as I would never have had the courage to resign. Following my departure, I suffered an existential crisis, maybe because I had forgotten who I was when I was not a team leader at this company. Today, many years have passed, and I look back at my time at the media production company with a bittersweet feeling. On one hand, I yearn for the feeling of being appreciated and valued; but on the other hand, I dread the potential cost of achieving such recognition.

Becoming "Doctor Loneliness"

As many who have pursued a PhD can attest, writing a dissertation is often lonely work. For me, this loneliness stems not only from the solitary nature of writing but also from the strange role of being a PhD candidate. Like academic adolescents, we stand with our feet in two worlds, sometimes uncertain of where we belong. But unlike the child who inevitably matures and enters the camaraderie of adulthood, we must actively prove ourselves to complete our academic metamorphosis. While this is an honorable trial, it can also be daunting. It has stirred feelings of inadequacy and inferiority within me, making me struggle to feel like a valuable member of my organization. I have doubted my competence and the significance of my work, and many times questioned whether it is worth completing this thesis, fearing that few will read it or find it interesting. These thoughts breed anxiety, causing me to become defensive, which makes me hide my work and myself from others. When overwhelmed by these feelings, I may appear arrogant and self-assured, but the

reality is far from it. My insecurities and loneliness manifest as a persona I do not want to be, and I yearn for a context that brings out the best in me.

At the start of the PhD program, I was part of a group of doctoral students whose company I greatly enjoyed. I cherish the experiences I have shared with these talented and inspiring individuals. However, as time passed and we matured into researchers with our own agendas, ideologies, and scholarly allies and adversaries, I felt the gap between us grew, and with it, I gradually withdrew. The once strong pull that bound us together weakened until little of it remained. This is not a reflection of any shortcomings on their part, rather it is a product of my personal journey and internal struggles. As I write this, I reflect on the past three years spent working from my apartment, maintaining minimal contact with anyone beyond family. Initially, I attributed this to Covid-19, but when quarantine ended, I still could not bring myself to return to the office. It became evident that the issue was not external but within me. As months and years passed, my isolation solidified, and the prospect of reintegration seemed insurmountable. The pull had not only vanished but been replaced by a repulsive force. Thinking about going to the office felt akin to standing on the ledge of a diving platform: I want to jump, but my body resists. Instead, I sit at home, fantasizing about the sense of community others enjoy in the office. And I envy them because I want nothing more than to belong somewhere and feel valued. But I also know what price I would have to pay to be a part of that togetherness. And I hesitate. This unresolved desire manifests a gnawing sensation in my chest, urging me to act but leaving me paralyzed, unsure which direction to take. Occasionally, this makes me feel so lost and so lonely.

In the end, I am (forthcoming) "Doctor Loneliness," both literally and symbolically. Writing a thesis on loneliness has been a double-edged sword. The topic has occupied my thoughts incessantly, even disrupting my sleep. However, writing about loneliness has also been cathartic, allowing me to thoroughly process my emotions and experiences. This journey has taught me much about myself – my desires, needs, and fears. Through this, I have come to realize that while I find the experience of loneliness painful, I am grateful for the capacity to feel lonely, as it helps me understand who I am. Putting these thoughts into words makes me self-conscious, but I do not think I should be embarrassed. If there is one thing that I hope readers take away from this thesis, it is that it is okay to be lonely. Loneliness, like grief and depression, is a natural part of life. More importantly, our capacity to feel lonely speaks to something fundamental about us as human beings. Arguably, only a creature capable of loneliness can truly appreciate togetherness. So perhaps, instead of avoiding loneliness, we should confront it, learn from it, and become more attuned to it. That is exactly what this thesis is about: it explores how loneliness moves through individuals and organizations alike, not as an inherently negative phenomenon but as a force that influences both our experiences and

behaviors. With this, I hope that my work will contribute to a broader conversation on the topic of workplace loneliness, encouraging others to reflect on their own experiences and fostering greater understanding and compassion within organizations and communities.

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Despite half of office workers report feeling lonely, the issue of loneliness remains largely overlooked in the field of management and organization studies. This dissertation investigates workplace loneliness through interviews, surveys, and a netnographic study to understand how people experience and cope with this feeling. Findings suggest that loneliness can manifest as both proximity-seeking behavior and social withdrawal, arising from the tension between the need for community and individuality. Consequently, loneliness is conceptualized not as being or feeling alone, but as feeling unrecognized. This concept broadens the discussion on emotions at work, challenging the dichotomy of "positive" and "negative" emotions. It also highlights the ethical aspect of belonging and underlines the consequences of unrealistic workplace expectations. This study contributes to the literature on workplace emotions, while also emphasizing the need for further research.

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