

## Temporalities of Loneliness and Participation: NCT as a space to alleviate loneliness, and how loneliness is experienced by new parents



### Summary

- This report summarises Dr Edwards and Dr Oman's research into the temporalities of loneliness, as experienced by new parents. Specifically, how 'NCT' (the National Childbirth Trust) is used as a space to alleviate self-predicted loneliness.
- Loneliness is increasingly described in medical terms: 'contagious'; 'an epidemic'; a bigger killer than smoking or obesity.
- In Autumn 2018, current Prime Minister, Theresa May, committed to social prescribing (when GPs advocate social activities) as a policy solution to 'combat loneliness'.
- However, qualitative research on participation and well-being has revealed that the relationship between loneliness and participation is more complex than assumed in this policy solution (Oman 2017).
- Current understanding of how loneliness is experienced is limited in various ways: while it is acknowledged that loneliness for most is not a stable, constant experience, but instead fluctuates, research has yet to satisfactorily resolve how to capture this qualitatively or quantitatively.
- This summary of research reflects on experimental elicitation interviews using a timeline method that interrogated the temporalities of experienced loneliness and their relationship to participation in NCT.
- The research found the experimental elicitation method to be appropriate for improving understanding of different temporalities and typologies of loneliness – and that it works with new parents, as an under-investigated social group at risk of loneliness.
- The research indicates that much like the rest of the population, it is likely that most new parents will identify as having experienced loneliness, some will be unsure, and less still will feel capable of confirming that they are not lonely. It also confirms that feelings of loneliness are differentiated: they fluctuate and differ in intensity over time.
- We argue that the concentration and duration of loneliness in the new parents we spoke with - and the increasing information we have about loneliness - indicate that new parents are particularly vulnerable to loneliness and this demands attention.
- The research also found participants were self-prescribing NCT as a means to alleviate predicted personal loneliness, or at least joining for the social aspects, rather than the public health advice on birth and post-natal care. This has implications, as NCT is not available to or experienced equally by all.

## Background

### ***Loneliness is one of the greatest public health challenges of our time***

(Theresa May, 2018)

‘Loneliness is one of the greatest public health challenges of our time’, stated current Prime Minister, Theresa May, as she launched the first cross-Government strategy to tackle loneliness, 15 October 2018 (UK Government 2018). The Government’s first loneliness strategy arguably follows media pressure to address this social issue, which in turn draws on academic evidence. A particular body of evidence has gained traction through medicalising loneliness; calling it an epidemic (Gill 2014), contagious (Cacioppo, cited in Adams 2016) stating it is more dangerous than obesity (Sample 2014) and smoking (Holt-Lunstad et al 2010). May’s emphasis was that ‘all GPs in England will be able to refer patients experiencing loneliness to community activities and voluntary services by 2023’ (UK Government 2018). This practice is known as social prescribing and has been advocated by some policy sector groups for some time (e.g. APPGAHW 2018).

### ***There are ‘big gaps in the current evidence base’***

(What Works for Well-being)

Reviews of research on loneliness acknowledge extant limitations (Jopling and Sserwanja 2016; What Works for Well-being). In the context of this report, firstly, we do not understand enough about the qualitative experience of loneliness in terms of its intensity and duration. Furthermore, we do not understand enough about how loneliness is experienced throughout the life course. While the data collected by the BBC Loneliness experiment (University of Manchester) has gone some way to address these limitations, they are not resolved and the data has not yet been fully analysed. Large-scale surveys tangentially report age in bands, thereby potentially limiting understanding differentiations of loneliness across life events. Furthermore, not all groups at risk of loneliness are receiving equal attention. Research targeting specific groups has prioritised understanding loneliness as a problem of ageing populations, when this is not the case. The recent loneliness experiment indicated that younger age-groups are more susceptible than older members of the population<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, as the BBC documentary ‘Age of Loneliness’ indicated, there are stories of loneliness from people of all ages, but who, for example: move for work, those with depression on low incomes or benefits and young mothers (BBC 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> Although there are a number of issues related to using these statistics in this way.

## Why new parents and NCT in relation to loneliness?

*a world in which no parent is isolated and all parents are supported to build a stronger society*  
(NCT Website)

The National Childbirth Trust is a UK charity that was established in 1956 to inform new parents as a public health issue, advising on postnatal care (Johanson et al 2002), although its scope has shifted to one of social responsibility (Health and Social Care Committee 2019). Alongside continuing to educate parents-to-be and new parents, one of its goals is to increase their 'reach into less affluent communities and to parents at greater risk of isolation' organising participatory events all over the country to raise funds and awareness of perinatal mental health issues and loneliness. This ongoing campaign actively encourages parents to participate in various organised group activities, such as walking, swimming and creative tea parties, to help combat isolation and loneliness (NCT website).

This recent focus of NCT on its potential contribution to alleviating loneliness corresponded to the observed hypothesis of this report's authors: that most parents we encountered who had enrolled onto NCT antenatal classes did so, not to receive medical information on parenting and birth, but instead as a means of precipitating social support in a new network, and that furthermore, this came by way of advice from other people who had recently been parents.

## The Aims and Scope of the Research

This research aimed to explore experienced loneliness and new parenthood. It focussed on:

- Understanding whether people join NCT for social connectedness, predicting isolation.
- Understanding whether and how loneliness is experienced by new parents. Are new parents 'at risk'?
- What are the temporalities of loneliness, as experienced in the first year of parenthood.
- How do current policy solutions work in this context? Does it account for how experience is differentiated? Particularly the classed and cultural nature of experiencing loneliness.

## **Methodology: Timelines to understand the temporalities of loneliness**

- Given the acknowledged lack of understanding of temporalities of loneliness, a timeline elicitation activity was added to a traditional one-to-one interview.
- The timeline was trialled to establish whether it suitably captured how loneliness is experienced qualitatively and the temporalities of these experiences.

A convenience sample (Lavrakas 2008) of six new parents from an NCT group in the North West of England were interviewed using a timeline elicitation method<sup>2</sup>. Five of these were female and one was male. All interviews were conducted within the period of maternity/paternity leave. Participants were initially encouraged to try and plot their own timeline on a blank piece of paper. If they found this difficult, some guidance was offered by the interviewer. Similarly, participants were encouraged to mark loneliness on the timelines, and it was hoped that they would indicate intensity and duration of experienced loneliness. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and participants were continuously interviewed throughout the experience of the elicitation activity, thus transcriptions contain data in which participants reflect on their timelines and the experience of making them.

## **Analysis**

Interviewer, Edwards shared the headline finding from the interviews: that 3 were lonely, 2 unsure, 1 not. At this juncture, Oman, who did not conduct the interviews, undertook independent semiotic analysis of the timelines. Each timeline was labelled lonely, not lonely, not sure, but this was the only context presented prior to semiotic analysis. Without sharing this semiotic analysis of the timelines, Edwards used the timelines to explain what was said in the interviews, elaborating on missing or obscured details. At this point correlations and new possible findings emerged. Key themes were tentatively agreed and the interview transcripts were re-coded according to the themes which 'emerged' from the two independent readings of the visual and transcribed data. This enabled both an inductive approach, as well as aspects of triangulation across researchers and datasets. Using this approach enabled typologies of loneliness to be identified as well as how descriptions of temporalities map onto these typologies.

## **Limitations**

In only interviewing those who self-selected from one NCT class, we are unable to generalise about how the relationship between participation and loneliness might exist, or be alleviated, more generally across the population. Although, given these findings corroborate those of Oman 2017, across other populations, it suggests possibilities for more generalisable findings with a larger sample. As a trial of the elicitation timeline tool, on such a small sample, we can only make limited claims regarding the suitability of the tool for larger samples, or, indeed, other populations that are likely to experience loneliness. These are emerging findings, and should be used as recommendations for further research. Full findings are forthcoming.

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<sup>2</sup> The research was approved by University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee

## Recommendations

This snapshot of our findings reveal that loneliness amongst new parents can range from strong to little intensity or can be felt throughout longer periods of time to much shorter episodic events. In other words, loneliness is experientially different amongst new parents and this calls for further investigation. From this preliminary analysis, we make the below recommendations:

- More research is required to understand how loneliness is experienced.
- Survey methodologies need to look at how loneliness is experienced across the life-course in a way that is more sensitive than age bands alone.
- Survey methodologies seeking to understand experienced loneliness need to adopt qualitative approaches to interrogate potential typologies.
- Elicitation methods are a useful means of interrogating typologies of loneliness and temporalities of loneliness.
- There needs to be recognition of how needs are differentiated when it comes to social care. For instance, what works for one new parent, doesn't work for all new parents. This is likely to be true of most population characteristics.

Participation spaces and places have been seen as alleviating the loneliness of some people at sometimes. At present, however, there is no evidence that participation combats loneliness.

## Emerging Findings

### 1. Typologies of Loneliness in Parenthood

A preliminary analysis identified that half the participants had definitely experienced loneliness, a third were not sure and one participant did not identify as lonely. As these relations to ideas of whether one was lonely – or not – corresponded with other research on participation and loneliness (Oman 2017), a typology was decided upon, as outlined below.

<b>TYPOLGY NAME</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>TEMPORALITY</b>	<b>INTENSITY</b>
<b>Only the lonely</b>	Definitely lonely	Long periods	Strong
<b>Isolating the loneliness is difficult</b>	Unsure lonely	Episodic	Mixed
<b>Not alone in a crowded schedule</b>	Adamant not lonely	Vignettes of possible loneliness argued against with positive narratives	Intensity less apparent in description

This typology was then used to decipher the timelines inductively and then triangulated with the interview transcripts. In the cursory analysis that follows, we first outline the typologies and then present an analysis of these in relation to temporality and participation.

### **TYPOLOGY 1: *Only the Lonely***

Half of the sample identified as lonely. They were explicit and emphatic in their oral descriptions, and clearly demarcated moments of change on their timelines.

***I suppose it was like a black hole really where you were just stuck in this loop and you just couldn't get out of it. And that loop was dangerous because, erm, I wasn't seeing anyone, I wasn't doing anything and I didn't realise***

This group can be identified by the intensity with which they describe loneliness, and the long duration of these experiences in new parenthood.

### **TYPOLOGY 2: *Isolating loneliness from other feelings and factors that affect new parents***

One third of our small sample were unsure whether they should or could identify their experiences as loneliness. These participants were hesitant in their markings on the timelines and highly reflexive in their spoken narrative. They were highly aware of factors that might confound their understanding of what they had experienced, presenting alternative possibilities such as partners' absence owing to work patterns, or hormones. This hesitancy might be explained by literature which moves between isolation as a state and loneliness as an emotion.

***There will definitely, definitely have been points of loneliness, but I don't know if that was exaggerated with tiredness. But I think, I don't know whether it's the hormones, I don't know whether it's the sheer confusion of data and stuff, erm, but yeah, I couldn't say I felt lonely because of the lack of people, but maybe in those hours, you know, the early hours, or the hours that you're awake kind of thing, when nobody else is, maybe.***

The caution in these participants' narratives appear in the sparse interactions with their timelines, light markings and less clearly delineated moments of change. However, in spite of this, the timelines still clearly contain points of identification of what they saw as the episodic changes in affective experience which could be described as loneliness.

### **TYPOLOGY 3: *Not Alone in a Crowded Schedule***

The participant who was sure they were not lonely was structured in their response to the timeline. Furthermore, their interview narrative demonstrated their inclination towards structure as an enviable quality in themselves. They offered a confident account of themselves using activities to structure their experience, making it difficult to experience loneliness. This chimes with other accounts of the relationship between participation and loneliness (Oman 2017). The timeline is clearly demarcated with activities as a positive statement, as below:

***The mums were saying to me, "Gosh, you're out of the house, you know, you're doing so well," you know, congratulating me. And I did look around and think, well, does my baby have any idea what is going on? But for me it was a social aspect. I had to get out, I had to have some structure to my week, I had to meet new people, and even though baby didn't probably have any idea what was going on at baby sensory, I felt like I was giving him a good start to life and at least learning from other mums what to do. But yeah, a lot of people made comment that it was--, well that I'd done very well to get out of the house.***

As well as clearly demarcating activities, this participant's timeline is punctuated with moments in which her decisions and activities leave her feeling judged, despite people's positive comments that she was doing well. Her interview reflects on how she wishes she had been even better informed of activities in advance, so she might better plan how to structure parenthood using activities to avoid isolation.

## **2. Using NCT as a form of participation to alleviate or combat loneliness**

To a degree, all the parents in this sample predicted or anticipated loneliness or isolation through parenthood and turned to NCT as a potential solution:

***[Husband] wasn't so bothered about it, doing NCT, but I said that I'll definitely need it for, one, going through it at the same time as other people, and having people to spend time with. 'Cause those days are long, actually, when you think back to it, those days are very long.***

People choose to participate in NCT because it presents an idea of social connectedness at a time where you are expecting a certain kind of loneliness; in that, the people who you already know will not necessarily be going through the same thing as you at the same time. One participant, our 'Not Alone on a Crowded Schedule' participant marked 'Fear of loneliness' on their timeline and one might extrapolate that they chose NCT at this moment. However, NCT was never offered up as a point of discussion, but had to be prompted by the interviewer. Notably, the phrase NCT does not appear in any timelines.

The timelines and interviews described many other forms of activities and social participation, however. These appear in the full paper, but it is not possible to describe these in detail here.

### 3. Temporalities of loneliness

#### ***Only the Lonely***

- Prolonged Experiences

Longer and more certain experiences of loneliness can be seen from the timelines by the ***Only the Lonely*** group. This intensity of experience is marked as a period of 'constant' loneliness on the timeline by one participant. The same participant describes five weeks together as a new family as a period of relief from loneliness.

Loneliness is identified as a sustained experience by another participant, both on the timeline and in the interview data. Markedly, loneliness shifts between the different compartments of their life, at the different stages of parenthood identified on the timeline. Notably, this participant's timeline indicates loneliness was something experienced before parenthood and new parenthood merely changed the nature of loneliness.

- Extremities of Loneliness

Another dimension of the temporal nature of loneliness is recognising the intensity and questioning past experiences in light of more recent experiences:

***you know, a week ago I had a day where I just felt extremely lonely and I kind of felt, like, that was the loneliest I'd ever been.***

#### ***Isolating loneliness from other factors that affect new parents***

- "Episodes"

The temporality of loneliness was described by those who were unsure as 'episodes'. This was marked on one timeline through a series of marks that suggested peaks and troughs. It may consist of a particular day or moments of a day, for example 'the early hours' when up with the baby:

***Yeah, so I could probably sense times, oh actually, six weeks in, six weeks in was definitely one. Six weeks in was definitely one because I remember making a phone call to mum, because he was being hell to sleep because of reflux, I hadn't slept, and I was at more of a 'I don't think I can cope anymore'.***

Despite identifying this as an episode on the timeline and within the discussion, this narrative is embedded in a story around the baby having reflux and the difficulty in coping with this, rather than it being a definitive experience of loneliness. This still suggests an uncertainty.

- Recognising possible episodes of loneliness

The unsure group were particularly forthcoming in discussing the act of *identifying* or *'sensing'* loneliness either from previous experience before pregnancy:

***I would definitely say for myself it wasn't prolonged, I had a risk of it being prolonged, because of probably the past, so I was quite aware that I was at risk.***



- Or an awareness of feeling isolated:

***No, for me I guess if I'm aware that I feel kind of lonely, a bit isolated I suppose, I will always find something to occupy myself, my brain, whether that's giving myself little goals, going out to the shop for example [laughs], or whether that's going to meet people. So I suppose it's not necessarily going and meeting people per se, it's--, [dealing with children in background]. Yeah, I suppose for me it's about having a distraction, I suppose.***

For this group finding a distraction was important, and possible in a way that the **Only the Lonely** group were not always able to do. However, that distraction did not rule out loneliness from their experience, which is in contrast to our participant we have placed in a typology called **Not Alone in a Crowded Schedule**

### **Not Alone in a Crowded Schedule**

- *Fear of loneliness*

Interestingly, it is only this participant who plotted a fear of loneliness on her timeline *prior* to giving birth. This was also a feature in her interview.

***The one thing I did as well prior to baby, in fact, yeah, I think it was two days after he was due, I got this massive fear of being alone, of being stuck.***

- *I don't feel that there is loneliness*

This participant discusses and has plotted on her timeline, an experience when her parenting was criticised whilst out shopping. She discusses how negative comments, such as this instance, have the potential to isolate. But this example is then brushed off in her interview:

***People think they know better and that--, that negative comment sticks with you and does annoy you [laughs]. But the other 90 per cent of people love to [inaudible 0:17:11] babies and that's a thing again why I don't feel that there is loneliness because everyone is--, everyone wants to chat to you to say how cute the baby is and everyone wants to have that social interaction. If I went in there on my own no one would talk to me. If I was standing in a queue no one would have that conversation with me.***

Although being criticised whilst out 'participating' in this way, shopping as an everyday activity is so important to her *not* feeling lonely because, in her opinion, it provides that "social interaction".

### **Conclusion**

In brief conclusion, our findings support our hypothesis that new parents are self-aware of the risks of loneliness before entering parenthood and that NCT is seen as alleviating that risk. Not everyone experiences loneliness in the same way, and more research needs to be done into experienced loneliness: its temporalities and intensities over time. The timeline elicitation methods enriched the interview as a means of collecting data on experiences of loneliness and triangulating the two data sets deepened understanding of how and whether people identify as lonely, and how that may play out in other aspects of their life. This research is a starting point for future research and we acknowledge the limitations of a small sample.

## **About the Authors**

Dr Delyth Edwards is a Lecturer in Childhood and Youth at Liverpool Hope University. Prior to that she was a postdoctoral researcher in the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester. She has conducted extensive research into the lived experiences of young people and adults with care experience. Her monograph - Cultural, Autobiographical and Absent Memories of Orphanhood: The Girls of Nazareth House Remember - was published in the Memory Studies series by Palgrave in 2017.

Dr Susan Oman is an AHRC Creative Economy Engagement Fellow looking at Data, Diversity and Inequality in the Sheffield Methods Institute, University of Sheffield. Susan completed her interdisciplinary PhD in 2017, based in Sociology at the University of Manchester. Her PhD research investigated the cultural politics of participation and well-being in the context of metrics and knowledge production. Susan was recently awarded an Honorary fellowship to the Institute of Cultural Practices at University of Manchester in recognition of her work on research methods and work in the cultural sector.

## **Additional information**

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