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Review

Phenomenological approaches to loneliness: a conceptual review

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This review examines key developments in recent research literature on the phenomenology of loneliness. In the behavioral sciences, loneliness is commonly defined as the perceived discrepancy between anticipated and actual quality of relationships. Understood as a subjective experience rather than an objective condition, loneliness is also of interest to philosophical phenomenology, which investigates lived experience through conceptual means. Concepts shape how a phenomenon is perceived as an object of study and determine which dimensions of experience are emphasized. Phenomenology examines loneliness from the first-person perspective, analyzing the fundamental structures — selfhood, intersubjectivity, affectivity, embodiment, and spatiality — that condition all experiencing. This article shows that theoretical commitments influence which types of practical solutions and therapeutic or social interventions authors propose for alleviating loneliness. The literature identifies evaluation as a notable theme, though it is mostly discussed from an individual perspective rather than in relation to the social norms and values that shape expectations of social connection. Therefore, future research should focus on analyzing these normative dimensions and their role in shaping experiences of loneliness.

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Introduction

Psychological research often defines loneliness as a negative emotional state resulting from a perceived gap between desired and actual social relationships and their quality [1–3]. However, philosophers at the intersection of psychology and philosophy note that this definition relies on theoretical assumptions emphasizing cognitive processing [4,5]. It frames loneliness as an individual emotional state while attributing its emergence to objective factors, such as the frequency of social interactions [5–7].

Philosophical debates seek to clarify implicit theoretical assumptions, challenge them, and propose alternatives. Philosophical phenomenology systematically investigates experience from the first-person perspective, offering conceptual distinctions for analyzing loneliness and its various forms. Rather than simply reporting experience descriptions, phenomenologists analyze the necessary structures of experience — selfhood, intersubjectivity, affectivity, embodiment, and spatiality — that condition all experiencing.

Since philosophy operates through concepts and investigates their relations, debates never emerge in a vacuum. Loneliness has been explored in the 20th-century existentialist, hermeneutic, psychoanalytic, and political traditions, which have shaped vocabularies, distinctions, and ways of perceiving the phenomenon [8,9]. In the last two decades, loneliness has been discussed in the philosophy of emotion and practical philosophy [10,11], philosophy of mind and cognitive sciences [2,6,12], existential philosophy and hermeneutics [13], philosophically informed health studies [14], feminist philosophy [15], and political theory [16–18].

Key reference points for the contemporary philosophy of loneliness in the 2020s include Valeria Motta's [4] examination of loneliness concepts in 20th-century psychological and psychoanalytical literature, Tom Roberts and Joel Krueger's [19] paper, which argues that in loneliness certain *social goods* are out of reach, and Ruth Rebecca Tietjen and Rick Anthony Furtak's article [20], which focuses on intimate relationships. Before the early 2020s, the phenomenology of loneliness was not an established field. However, the 2021 conference *Loneliness in Philosophy and Psychology*, followed by a *Topoi* special issue in 2023, helped organize the emerging research area [21,22].

This review focuses on articles published in philosophy journals between 2023 and 2025, with key 2022 papers included for context. Articles were located using the search term 'phenomenology loneliness' on Google Scholar, PhilPapers, and EBSCOhost. The literature reflects a broad understanding of phenomenology, including descriptive, existential, critical, and transcendental approaches that share a focus on lived experience. Papers that engage and advance the debate, despite using a different theoretical framework, have also been included. This approach recognizes that phenomenologies of loneliness constitute a transdisciplinary field drawing on diverse theoretical and empirical frameworks to explore experiences of loneliness. The review shows that many philosophical accounts propose practical solutions for alleviating loneliness, which vary according to their theoretical commitments. Evaluation is also a recurring theme, though it is mostly discussed from an individual perspective rather than in relation to the social norms and values that shape expectations of social connection.

Loneliness and selfhood

Phenomenological analyses frame loneliness as an intersubjective phenomenon, but they emphasize different dimensions of the experience — selfhood, affectivity, embodiment, and spatiality — depending on their theoretical focus. Accounts on *selfhood* examine the impact of loneliness on self-perception and seek to articulate its depth and complexity [23–25].

Valeria Motta [23] and Michael Larkin [25] argue that loneliness reveals a shift in conscious experience, manifesting as self-disruption. Combining phenomenology with qualitative analysis, Motta studies individuals who have relocated to a new cultural environment and feel out of sync with it [23]. She concludes that others fundamentally shape self-perception and identity by revealing different aspects of oneself and one's situation. Moreover, some experiences feel incomplete without being witnessed. This work highlights the impact of others' presence on self-perception and helps explain why loneliness feels excruciating.

Axel Seemann [24] addresses similar issues through a slightly different lens, using the term *self-estrangement*. In his view, loneliness entails an acute awareness of the absence of meaningful social connections, where the self is both part of the missing connection and the observer of that absence. He argues that social agents are fundamentally interactive beings who construct sophisticated models of their shared social environment to act competently and predict others' behavior. Loneliness is painful because one feels unmoored from this co-created milieu and longs for a sense of self shaped by social ties. When lonely, one does not merely miss friends or partners but also the experience of oneself as a friend or partner.

Understanding loneliness as self-disruption or self-estrangement also has practical implications. Motta and Larkin [25] suggest that therapeutic interventions should not focus solely on forming social relationships but also on supporting the processing of one's self-relation.

Do we all die alone? Intersubjectivity of loneliness

Shaun Gallagher [5] similarly emphasizes the profound relationality of human beings, critiquing the notion of existential loneliness and the common claim that "we all die alone." He challenges existentialist and psychoanalytic perspectives [26] that understand loneliness as a fundamental ontological structure, most intensely realized in the face of death and life-threatening situations. Instead, he argues that loneliness is most deeply felt in the loss of a loved one [6,27]. Both Gallagher [5] and Galanaki [28] refer to developmental theories of *primary intersubjectivity*, understood as a dynamic set of intersubjective processes shaping who we are. Rather than being an inherent human condition, loneliness arises from disruptions in our capacity for intersubjective interaction. This view suggests that therapeutic interventions should go beyond encouraging the acceptance of loneliness as an existential given [5].

In line with this perspective, Emily Hughes [29] explores the link between loss and loneliness in old age, noting that aging entails multiple losses concerning (1) *future* interpersonal possibilities and shared projects [30,31], and (2) a shared *past* embedded in the body through interaffectivity and bodily attunement [32]. She argues that loneliness in old age reveals the fragility and vulnerability of the body and affirms that human life is inherently *for another*, grounded in reciprocal respect, recognition, and dignity [29]. Emphasizing the intercorporeal and interaffective structure of body memory, she recommends therapies such as animal-assisted therapy, massage, dance, art, and music, as well as care settings that integrate childcare and elder care, to support grief processing and reorientation.

The social goods model of loneliness and its critiques

Much of the recent philosophical research draws on or responds to a paper by Tom Roberts and Joel Krueger [19,33,34], who define loneliness as an emotional experience of absence. They argue that loneliness is tied to a pro-attitude toward some absent thing or quality, combined with an awareness that it cannot be made present. The main argument is that loneliness involves the absence of various *social goods*, such as companionship, social recognition, and friendship, distinguishing it from affective states like homesickness, grief, or nostalgia, which also involve absence.

Replying, Mauro Rossi [35] argues that the social goods model does not sufficiently explain why loneliness manifests as a negative and painful state. He contends that it is not enough to say that social goods are absent; rather, attention must be given to how the individual *evaluates* the absence of friends, relationships, or companionship as something bad. Furthermore, Rossi suggests that the intensity of loneliness does not necessarily depend on the degree of awareness of the pro-attitude: chronic loneliness, for instance, might be better understood as a disposition rather than as an intentional emotional experience.

Qiannan Li [36] similarly remarks that loneliness can take forms that differ from Roberts and Krueger's model. She distinguishes *lucid loneliness*, a state in which one has a clear awareness of the desired but unattainable social goods, from *clueless loneliness*, which arises when a person experiences loneliness without a salient frustration of a pro-attitude. One may, for example, struggle to form concrete desires or be mistaken about them; others may hold illusions or self-deceptive beliefs about what they need or whether their needs are being met, or lack a desire for social goods altogether.

Loneliness as an enduring affective state

Theories of moods, existential feelings, and background feelings provide a distinct framework for studying loneliness as an affective experience [31,37–41]. These theories challenge the view that loneliness is solely an autonomous, intentional emotional experience or an episodic affective state. Scholars in these frameworks have explored various forms of loneliness, including chronic loneliness and forms not immediately salient to the subject [38–40].

Matthew Ratcliffe [31,37] describes loneliness as a prereflective way of being in the world that conditions the experience as a whole. Loneliness appears as a painful sense of detachment, where certain interpersonal possibilities — such as being dynamically affected by another person with comfort, ease, and spontaneity — are inaccessible to oneself but seem to be available to others. This implies an element of comparison.

Laura Candiotto [39] uses Ratcliffe's concept of existential feelings to examine *extended loneliness* in online interactions, defining it as a background sense of disconnection and unsatisfying relationships arising from hyperconnectivity. Rather than an experience of absence, extended loneliness is shaped by shallow digital connections.

Advocating a pluralistic account of loneliness, Philipp Schmidt [40] investigates a specific type of persisting loneliness that emerges from a person's distinctive experiential structure and their way of engaging with others. He introduces *experiential loneliness* to examine cases where social connection appears objectively possible but subjectively unattainable, making it difficult to access or enjoy social goods. Schmidt suggests that certain experiential styles obstruct social connection while fostering loneliness. Addressing the styles hindering stable social bonds could thus inform therapeutic approaches and help individuals navigate the social world.

Lonely spaces and embodiment

New work is also emerging to conceptualize the spatial dimensions of loneliness. Ratcliffe [37] explores what it means to experience a place as lonely, arguing that a lonely place lacks certain social possibilities, or one experiences them as inaccessible. Significant possibilities may still seem available to others but not to oneself, reinforcing a sense of exclusion from social practices, opportunities, and interaction.

Building on this, Xinyi Angela Zhao [42] argues for an existential-embodiment account that would take seriously the spatial dimension of loneliness. She challenges the use of the concept of *absence* altogether and frames loneliness as an experience of *emptiness*, especially in cases of loss and breakup, where the concrete, habitual space of the significant other is left empty.

In their novel account of lonely spaces, Osler, Roberts, and Krueger [43] draw on theories of affordances, the action possibilities environments offer. Whereas for Ratcliffe, lonely places lack social possibilities or are experienced as inaccessible, Osler et al. introduce *obsolete affordances* to describe spaces that offer possibilities and call out for embodied engagement but remain unrealized. Their approach may help better understand grieving processes connected to places once full of life or spaces never taken up as intended.

Some papers also merge the social goods model of loneliness with theories of existential feelings [24,44]. Flavio Williges [44], for example, defines *pandemic loneliness* as a dynamic, embodied response to the loss of social goods, affecting one's sense of involvement or belonging in familiar spaces like parks and streets. He suggests that pandemic loneliness offers evaluative insight into personal and environmental significance, highlighting how places shape social identity and fulfill existential needs.

Loneliness and phenomenological psychopathology

Philosophers and philosophically inclined health researchers also investigate loneliness in the context of psychopathological phenomena. For example, Philipp Schmidt's [40] work discusses loneliness in the case of borderline personality disorder, Ian Marcus Corbin and Amar Dhand [45] frame chronic loneliness itself as a pathological condition, and Ulla Schmid [46] analyzes experiences of loneliness in the context of harmful alcohol use. Schmid conceptualizes loneliness as an evaluative

and interactional phenomenon. Based on interviews with individuals undergoing inpatient treatment for alcohol dependence, Schmid identifies three manifestations of loneliness: 1) abandonment and loss, 2) experiences of emptiness and void, and 3) feelings of not belonging to one's everyday social environment. All these experiences involve difficulty in engaging in social interaction.

Krueger, Osler, and Roberts examine loneliness in social anxiety disorder [34] and in depression, autism, and anorexia nervosa [33]. They argue that while loneliness is common across these conditions, it manifests differently: in autism, through difficulties in social attunement; in depression, through feelings of worthlessness and disconnection; and in anorexia, through disrupted interoception and affect, where social withdrawal is linked to body image and control.

Normativity of loneliness

It is noteworthy that several papers mention evaluation and comparison as crucial aspects of loneliness. As the standard definition of loneliness also suggests, what is evaluated and compared is not only the number of relationships but also certain *qualities* within them. This raises questions about how these qualities should be understood and where the criteria for evaluation originate. Literature broadly claims that expectations of social connection reflect basic human needs [2,11,45], but social norms and values also shape experiences of loneliness [47,48]. Phenomenologists, from Edmund Husserl onward, have developed theoretical tools for analyzing the normative dimensions of experience, but in loneliness research, they have received only limited attention.

Phenomenological studies that touch upon the issue of the anticipated quality of relationships in loneliness distinguish between expectations in *intimate relationships* (I-Thou) and in the *broader social milieu* [37,48]. While the former relies on being recognized and valued as one is by a significant other, the latter involves a sense of belonging within an engaging social network [6,37,47,48]. Sarah Pawlett Jackson [48] argues that this distinction is crucial for a psychosocial approach to loneliness, integrating its structural (interpersonal and social) aspects with lived experience.

Kaitlyn Creasy [49] further elaborates on the complexity of social needs, placing the concept of *recognition* at the heart of loneliness. She argues that loneliness may arise when the need to be recognized as a particular person remains unfulfilled, when essential social needs for self-realization go unmet, or when, despite these needs being met, one feels they do not concretely matter in others' everyday lives. Importantly, Creasy aims to understand aversive forms of loneliness in which a person's desire for acknowledgment in a particular way is not fulfilled.

The cultural and social context of loneliness is most strikingly highlighted when the expectations become ethically problematic, unilateral, or even politically charged [47,49,50]. Ruth Rebecca Tietjen and Sanna Karoliina Tirkkonen have developed critical phenomenological accounts showing that loneliness is sometimes framed to justify violence in radicalized online communities [47]. Additionally, loneliness takes on distinct characteristics when shaped by marginalization or exclusion [50]. In these cases, it is hardly sufficient to suggest that alleviating loneliness should primarily focus on one's self-relation.

Conclusion

Phenomenological studies frame loneliness as an intersubjective phenomenon, emphasizing different dimensions of the experience depending on their theoretical focus. Remarkably, they often propose practical solutions for alleviating loneliness, which vary according to their theoretical commitments. Evaluation is also frequently mentioned in the literature. However, it is typically discussed from an individual perspective rather than in relation to the social norms and values that influence how the quality of social connection is evaluated. Loneliness should be seen as an affective phenomenon that reflects cultural norms, values, and practical arrangements. This does not diminish its significance — phenomenological analyses show that loneliness, regardless of its causes, is a deeply painful experience. However, a thorough examination of phenomenological normativity in loneliness remains underexplored. The role of philosophy in this task is not only to describe these evaluations but to explore and distinguish the various types of normativity through which loneliness is assessed from a first-person perspective.

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No data were used for the research described in the article.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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