ON LONELINESS

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FRANKLIN, A.S. (2009): 'On loneliness', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 91 (4): 343–354.

ABSTRACT. Contemporary Western societies are characterized by 'until further notice' relationships (and precarious or very loose social bonds), historically high levels of mobility of both capital and labour and growing numbers of single person households. As artefacts of freedom and choice these social arrangements do not inevitably give cause for concern but they may come at a price and that might involve more frequent and more sustained experiences of loneliness. This article argues that we know very little about loneliness even though some observers have described it as a new plague. The article sets out to describe the dimensions of a sociology of contemporary loneliness in terms of its social distribution, its extent and impact as well as its nature as an emotional and ontological experience. While we may be heading towards a civilization which, as Michel Houellebecq darkly hints in the recent novel *The Possibility of an Island* (2006), may have little further need for 'the social', for the time being it seems as though this problem (that would 'rather not' speak its name) is the cause of considerable suffering and pain.

Key words: loneliness, individualism, Zygmunt Bauman, social networks, community

Introduction

In Michel Houellebecq's recent (2006) novel *The Possibility of an Island* we see contemporary society and social relations through the eyes of a perceptive comedian, Daniel, who has enjoyed great success but who, in his forties is beginning to get bored and lose motivation. Always something of a misanthropist, he finds solace in sex and love, though as luck would have it his two major relationships are with a woman who can love but who does not enjoy sex (in the first part of his life) and, later, a much younger woman, Rachael who is motivated by sexual pleasure but who avoids love bonds at all costs. Rachael rescues him from his midlife ennui but through her and her acquaintances Daniel is forced to see how contemporary social relations are based merely on desire and pleasurability. The principles and possibilities of collectivity, social responsibility and love, which were strived for by his generation, have no meaning for Rachael's. At forty he feels the chill of her generation's indifference and incipient ageism. This state of affairs in his personal life provides the context for his interest in a new socio-spiritual movement which takes individualism to the next degree: sensing that the social is now redundant and historically a dangerous stage of human evolution they create a new species of autotelic neohumans who live alone and practice techniques, drawn from Buddhism and others, of inner peace and tranquillity, individual enlightenment, contemplation and historical study of their ancestry and world. Of course, the genetic technician who provided the neohumans with self-sustaining technological life bubbles and the ability to photosynthesize all their bodily nourishment and needs in fact provided the economy of this perfected individualism, 'the possibility of an island'. The novel explores Daniel's experience of loneliness as a human and the loneliness of his neohuman descendants. It is surely a novel for our times and raises issues that have tended to be ignored or brushed under the carpet. I will engage Bauman's analysis of the social bond (through his ideas of liquid modernity, life and love) as well as the services of a growing corps of empirical researchers from a range of social scientific disciplines, all of whom have sensed and reported on the disturbing 'epidemic' of loneliness.

This article takes a stiff new broom to this hidden debris, this archaeology of contemporary loneliness. I aim to understand what loneliness *means* in the contemporary period, to understand how changing social structures and social relations have impacted on loneliness as an emotional experience as well as its distribution and frequency. The article begins by using Zygmunt Bauman's recent writing on the transition from solid to liquid modernity to interpret shifts in the nature of social bonds that might impact upon the experience of loneliness. Although there are other social theorists and geographers whose work is relevant to the study of loneliness (e.g. Elias 1985; Lasch 1985; Giddens 1991; Sennett 1992, 1998; Castells 1996; Putnam 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Elliott and Lemert 2008; Illouz 2008) it is Bauman's work that offers the most radical reappraisal of contemporary forms of loneliness since it challenges socio-spatial models of loneliness and investigates changes that derive from a complex of consumerism, individu-

alism, desire, freedom and choice. In a more mobile, more networked, connected and extra-territorial world, the paradox at the centre of Bauman's work is that the social bonds that can now be created (and even proliferate) are looser, weaker – and emotionally less satisfying, leaving loneliness as an endemic state affecting everyone, rather than a socially isolated minority. Ironically, the contemporary impulse is to avoid states of satisfaction in favour of permanent states of desire and in a way, loneliness can be defined as longing for an enduring bond, or perhaps even unconditional love; two things that in Bauman's terms have become illusive and fugitive.

This analysis will then generate a new understanding of what loneliness means in the contemporary period and what we might expect to find in terms of empirical evidence. Recent empirical studies of loneliness and other registers of the changing nature of social bonds will be re-examined to see if they are broadly consistent with the scenario suggested by Bauman. For example, we will include recent studies of Internet use and loneliness, relationships with companion animals as surrogate human bonds and the spatial distribution of loneliness.

What do we know about loneliness?

In the 1960s and 1970s loneliness emerged as an issue that related to concerns about the decline of community and structural impacts on sociability though at times when the nature of the importance and durability of the social bond was not at stake/questioned. It spawned a series of formalistic, under-theorized studies of loneliness that formally measured what it took to be the coordinates of loneliness – degree of connectedness plus degree of social support – of which the UCLA Loneliness Scale was one result and the book by Weiss (1973) another. It was as if the experience/emotion/perception of loneliness could be connected causally/directly to the degree of connection and support. But this is clearly deficient since *both* could be caused by an overarching aspect of sociability, namely, that the loosening of social bonds in the name of freedom creates both the departure from norms of connection and social support and the perception of *being* detached (or free). And of course loneliness is above all else an individual judgement based on norms and ideals of social engagement.

Studies of loneliness have long grappled with its paradoxical nature: loneliness could be experienced regardless of whether sufferers are connected to a spouse, family unit, neighbourhood or friendship circle. In other words it was not the quantum or spatial proximity of the bonds in question or the degree of support they offered, but the *quality* of the bond itself, particularly its absence or breakdown. Loneliness can be grasped as the 'feeling' or the emotional experience of those without or denied the experience of the bond, or specific prior bonds. It can therefore arise and persist 'inside' 'contemporary partnerships' as much as when they are cancelled. This paradox was dealt with, especially in the 1960s and 1970s by acknowledging that some people were socially isolated by others for behavioural reasons or because key relationships, particularly marriages can and did fall short of expectations. All this is true.

However, it is also true that from the 1970s until the present there has been a general *loosening* of the bond itself; its very nature has been profoundly changed to the point where norms, expectations and experiences have become very confused. So, for example, while the notion of marriage still contains the *idea* and *hope* of a 'unto death do us part' biography based on a love that was ideally 'unconditional', the reality is that few subscribe to it or submit to it. For most the opposite seems to hold: existing bonds are 'until further notice'.

From the growth of pre-nuptial agreements (which instantly detach partners from a common sense of material union in marriage and found marriage almost entirely on optional choice), to the growth of loose partnerships, serial partnerships and normative resort to divorce and separation, the emotional experience of partnerships has been reshaped. They are now 'until further notice' (and love is now highly conditional); they are based more on the exchange of pleasure and desire than on the exchange of support and dependency (there is pressure to pleasure each other or face the prospect of being replaced); they are based on the projects of the self, self-fulfilment and self-realization rather than commitments and duty to each other and to the projects of home; they are predicated not on the notion of stable cultural identities (a bloke you can depend on; the constant woman) and the self but on open-ended projects of self-making and becoming (someone else). Who can commit to a contract where even the subjects (and what they have 'on offer') cannot be guaranteed?

On these terms partnerships are more tentatively made and more tenuously experienced. Press coverage of the recent marriage of Tom Cruise to Kate

Holmes was quick to speculate on how long the USD 6 million set-up cost was going to last. Hollywood pundits thought it stood a good chance, 'maybe as much as five years' suggested one 'insider'; most stories included news that the bookmaker William Hill was considering offering odds on its longevity. The point is, that although this partnership has all the hallmarks of a Hollywood marriage, marriages and for that matter partnerships, in general, have become more like it than not. The gossip surrounding this particular wedding is less to do with the likely faithfulness of the partners than how long they can possibly bear one another. All marriages these days commence with this tension and possibly also, if we are perfectly honest, with such speculation.

Marriage and partnerships therefore also have a built-in sense of isolation or individuation. If it was the bond that previously gave people the sense of connection and the security of long-term social support, then bond-free or bond-poor contemporary marriages provide for the possibility of loneliness within them, between them and beyond them. This state of affairs is particularly poignant in an aging society where the emotional experience of loneliness increases, particularly in the Fourth Age (Smith 2000).

Bauman on loneliness

I want to commence my analysis with an assessment of both of Bauman's concerns about the nature of contemporary bonds and my understanding of loneliness not as an effect of a decline in social connectivity or the traffic of social exchange, but as the result of the absence or loss of the bond in our lives. We might stretch it further to say that loneliness marks the absence or loss of love in our lives. We must of course measure loneliness as it impacts on the individual, as a result of the slings and arrows of everyday fortunes. But it would be a mistake to pass it off *merely* as an individual *biographical* thing, something that is inevitable. Because if Bauman is anywhere near right we should regard contemporary loneliness as a consequence of social structural change; an epiphenomenon of the shift (in his terms) from the era of 'solid' to the era of 'liquid' modernity. It is a complex transition in which solid relationships characterized by the bond (at work, between partners and so on) have given way to individual freedom and the 'until further notice' relationship, but it is more than just this.

Consumerism has changed the way we organize our individualism in specific ways: we no longer even think or dream of satisfaction; of permanent states of satiation. Rather we are motivated by both permanent states of *desire* (which correspond to a fixation on what might be next; how better to be pleasured, how one's subjectivity may shift in a permanent state of exploration and becoming) and *wish* (which recognizes that along the pathways of life there may/will be all manner of things which hail us, distract us or lure us away from the current path we are on). According to Bauman consumerism organizes our individual stance to things in general; everything, including relationships, is aestheticized and evaluated in terms of its capability to offer beauty, desire and pleasureability. Everything and consequently everybody becomes disposable (or exchangeable), and the experience of being disposed of (or exchanged), the fear of immanent disposal (or replacement) and the background steady state of *disposability* all serve to undermine, erode and ultimately destroy human bonds. Therefore we live in a constant state of potential loneliness, enter into states and periods of loneliness more frequently and suffer the emotional condition of loneliness, alone. For Bauman, the crisis of loneliness is also registered by the rise of network society and networking or connectivity as a new form of sociability that fills the void once occupied by the bond.

For Bauman loneliness also amounts to the absence or loss of love; by definition love for him is the emotional feeling of and commitment to the enduring, *solid* bond.

Bauman and liquid love

In the absence of love/bonds what do people do? Which is like saying how do people cope with loneliness. Bauman sees several strategies at play and they all work hard not at love but at 'relationships': the busy traffic of 'networking', 'confessional rituals', 'counselling' (p. 32), 'surfing the net' (p. 34) and seeking electronic connectedness.

Bauman (2003, p. xi) has this to say about the substitution of love and bonds with so-called relationships:

> They say that their wish, passion, aim or dream is 'to relate'. But are they not in fact mostly concerned with how to prevent their relationship from curdling and clotting? Are they indeed after relationships that hold, as they say they are, or do they, more than anything else, desire those relationships to be

> light and loose, so that after the pattern of Richard Baxter's riches that were supposed to 'lie on the shoulders like a cloak' they could be 'thrown aside at any moment'?

It is the idea of commitment inherent in relationships that contemporary individualists find unacceptable:

> However hard the relationship seekers and their councillors try, the notion resists being fully and truly cleansed of its disturbing and worrying connotations. It stays pregnant with vague threats and sombre premonitions; it tells of the pleasures of togetherness in one breath with the horrors of enclosure. Perhaps this is why, rather than report their experience and prospects in terms of relating, and, relationships, people speak ever more often 0 of connections, of, 'connecting' and 'being connected'.

This is because connections have the curious capacity to exist regardless of whether they are currently activated or temporarily cancelled or inoperative. They can give the *impression* of new forms of community, friendship, bonds and so forth as those sociologists 'used to composing theories out of questionnaire statistics and the commonsense beliefs such statistics record' have hurried to conclude (Bauman 2003, pp. viii–ix) – and he refers here surely to the sanguine sociology of network espoused by Giddens (1991) and Castells (1996), but Bauman (2003, p. xii) sees precisely the opposite:

> Unlike 'relations', 'kinship', 'partnerships' and similar notions that make salient the mutual engagement while excluding or passing over in silence its opposite, the disengagement, 'network' stands for a matrix for simultaneously connecting and disconnecting; networks are unimaginable without both activities being simultaneously enabled. In a network, connecting and disconnecting are equally legitimate choices, enjoy the same status and carry the same importance. No point in asking which of the two complementary activities constitutes 'the essence' of network! 'Network' suggests moments of 'being in touch' interspersed with periods of roaming. In a network, connections are entered into on demand and can be broken at will.

While networks do indeed offer freedom from restraints while being on-tap 24/7, it comes at a price. The networker[1] has to keep at it because the minute they stop their connectivity is terminated. Equally the effect they seek is only guaranteed by speeding up their relatings (Bauman 2003, pp. xii–xiii):

> As Ralph Waldo Emerson pointed out, when skating on thin ice your salvation is in speed. When the quality lets you down, you tend to seek redemption in quantity. If 'commitments are meaningless' while relations cease to be trustworthy and are unlikely to last, you are inclined to swap partnerships for networks. Once you have done it, however, settling down turns out to be even more difficult (and so more off-putting) than before – you now miss the skills that would or could make it work. Being on the move, once a privilege and an achievement, becomes a must. Keeping up speed, once an exhilarating adventure, turns into an exhausting chore. Most importantly, that nasty uncertainty and that vexing confusion, supposed to be chased away thanks to speed, refuse to go.

But it is more than a chore and the problem is not merely one of exhaustion. Unlike true bonds, which have the unique quality of delivering that sense of security, connectedness and belonging regardless of whether partners are interacting, co-present, getting on well or in the full grip of passion, the electronic relationship only exists through constant connectivity:

> Both urges (the drive for freedom and the craving for belonging) melt and mix in the all-absorbing and all-consuming labour of 'networking' and surfing the 'network'. The ideal of 'connectedness' struggles to grasp the difficult, vexing dialectics of the two irreconcilables. It promises a safe (or non-fatal at least) navigation between the reefs of loneliness and commitment, the scourge of exclusion and the iron grip of bonds too tight, an irreparable detachment and irrevocable attachment.
>
> (Bauman 2003, pp. xii–xiii)

Commenting on a new poll showing that email forms of communication are declining while communication by mobile phone and the love affair with them grows ever more intense, Bauman (2002, p. 153) suggests that the latter is more con-

sistent with preferred forms of weak or loose forms of relationship:

> The latent function that mobile phones have and email sorely misses is that they enable the talkers to opt *out* of the place in which they are bodily immersed at the moment – to be elsewhere, 'extra-territorial' and untied to the physical space they bodily occupy. In addition however, they offer the talkers the facility to make their unattachment manifest and publicly known where and when it truly counts. The expectation of another ring lays bare the 'until-further-notice' character of the contacts with the physically close; it makes it obvious that face-to-face contacts bear a secondary importance compared to those other, electronically mediated contacts and they could, and would be, broken at any moment.

According to Bauman this 'extra-territoriality' is a generalized feature of contemporary societies and has important *spatial* consequences for how loneliness impacts on the individual and how we conceive of it (and set about measuring it) as a 'located' emotional experience (Davidson *et al*. 2005). It points up not only how many people live lives that are not focused around strong or stable spatial communities and whose mobility forces them into more technologically mediated relationships but also how even those whose networks are relatively spatially focused around place no longer carry the same emotional charge as they once did. As relationships become weakened by new forms of consumerism, individualism, extra-territoriality and an avoidance of solid relationships of any kinds, it may therefore be a profound mistake to locate the cause of loneliness as the breakdown of community or networks – or in particular places. It may not be the location, spatial density or frequency of social relations that are relevant so much as the *nature of the bond itself*. It is entirely possible, therefore, that we find dense networks, relatively intact communities and even enhanced forms of networking, alongside historically unprecedented levels of loneliness *regardless* of space and place. As I will show below, pre-exisiting measures of loneliness have been based, in part, on size and frequency of social network particularly localized social relations. It may well be that new methods need to be devised to investigate contemporary patterns of loneliness, which is created by failed, diminished or absent social bonds.

What do we know about contemporary loneliness?

First, if Bauman is right we ought to expect measures of loneliness to have increased over the past 50 years.[2] Unfortunately there were no broad baseline surveys conducted around the mid-twentieth century and so there is nothing to compare survey data that have emerged in recent years. Crudely though, we might conclude that very expensive social surveys are only justifiable when there are good (anecdotal, qualitative, practical, therapeutic, etc.) grounds to suspect a problem exists or is worsening.

Spatial anxieties

Thus, the earliest studies of loneliness began with the growing concern for elderly people in the postwar period in relation to what is broadly understood as *spatial* anxieties over the decline of communities, the growth of New Towns and increasing rates of residential and employment spatial mobility. These provide the only solid data on rates of change (substantial increases, as it happens) in loneliness, as will be reported below. While concern for loneliness among the elderly has not abated and still drives the largest single research effort on loneliness, recent surveys by Flood (2005) in Australia, Perlman (1990) in Canada and the Ministry of Social Development (2006, pp. 120–121) in New Zealand have been warranted by concerns for rising rates of loneliness in other age groups. These concerns all focus around an entirely new phenomenon, which also has a strongly spatial content: the growth of single person households and single person living, particularly among young adults, the divorced/separated and those delaying or avoiding marriage altogether.

Almost seven million English people (or 13% of the population) live alone, 'four times more than in 1960' (Bennett and Dixon 2006). In Australia things are no different: Flood (2005) found 12 per cent of his sample of 25–44 years olds living alone. Lone person households increased from 18.8 per cent of households in 1986 to 24 per cent in 2001 (AIFS 2006) and are projected to increase from 1.8 million to 3.7 million in 2026 – a rise of 105 per cent (ABS 2005).

While of course it is entirely appropriate to identify these changes as symptomatic of rising rates of loneliness, it must be remembered that they *are* only symptomatic and must not be confused with cause.

Put another way, aloneness or being alone in one sense or another does not automatically translate to loneliness. Many people prefer to be alone, enjoy their own company or are not at all bothered by those periods of time when they are separated from those with whom they share a bond. Equally it is possible to feel loneliness in large crowds, in busy social networks, in families, in functioning households, *in relationships*. According to Dan Kiley (1989) between 10 and 20 million Americans suffer from what he calls living-together loneliness.

Nonetheless, statistically, loneliness is positively related to aloneness. While opting for aloneness is consistent with Bauman's emphasis on freedom and choice and the avoidance of commitment and 'solid' relationships, another way of looking at the same thing is by looking at the frequency with which individuals have the relationships (with employer, loved ones) and other sources of stability (e.g. financial stability) cancelled. Flood (2005) for example, found that 20 per cent of men between 24 and 44 in his sample 'had undergone a separation or divorce', 6 per cent had been fired from their jobs and 7 per cent reported worsening financial circumstances in the previous 12 months. Furthermore, men who had been dumped in the past 12 months reported lower rates of social support than men in similar household types who had not been dumped. While Perlman (1990) probably speaks for all recent surveys when he argues that 'loneliness was highest among young adults, declined over midlife, and increased modestly in old age', Flood's recent (2005) study shows that some types of individuals and groups in society, as opposed to age groups may be bearing the brunt of this so-called 'new epidemic'.

According to Andersson's (1998, p. 267) review of studies of loneliness, many studies seem to agree that 'at least one person in four reports loneliness to occur constantly or fairly often and around 25 per cent of the population currently appear to be lonely from most nationally representative samples in Western societies.' Of course these snapshot surveys hide the fact that while a consistent proportion are lonely at any one time, all the evidence seems to suggest that most people can expect to experience it at regular intervals during the life course.

Elderly

Even though there was considerably less concern and thus few attempts to measure loneliness around the mid twentieth century at least two British studies (Sheldon 1948; Tunstall 1963) now 'classics', provide something of a baseline for loneliness among the elderly. While 21 per cent reported feeling loneliness often or sometimes to Sheldon, almost 40 per cent reported loneliness often or sometimes in a recent survey by Victor *et al*. (2006) that replicated the original instrument. According to Victor *et al*. however, these data deriving from quantitative social surveys appear to under represent the true extent of loneliness. In their study they used both qualitative and quantitative instruments and while 38 per cent reported significant loneliness in the quantitative study, 58 per cent reported significant loneliness in the qualitative study.

Equally (but significantly), those reporting 'never lonely' seems to have dropped significantly from 79 to 61 per cent. Interestingly, Tunstall's 1963 measure of social isolation was defined as less than 21 direct, face-to-face contacts per week. He found 21 per cent of his sample to be socially isolated by these criteria but if Victor *et al*. (2006) had applied the same criteria to their sample the socially isolated would currently amount to 75 per cent.

Another recent British study by Demakakos (2006) used the UCLA Loneliness Scale to investigate loneliness among those aged 50 and over. Using measurements of 'feeling left out', 'lack of companionship' and 'isolation from others', around 30–35 per cent of the 50–52 year olds were lonely often or most of the time. The proportion of those other age groups experiencing loneliness remained constant until the mid-seventies when it rises steeply to between 38 and 50 per cent.

Gender

While the experience of loneliness does not vary hugely by gender among older people (Andersson 1998; Demakakos 2006; Victor *et al*. 2006), Flood found a disturbing gender asymmetry in his study. To begin with, substantially more men than women live alone between the age of 20 and 54 but at the same time 'men tend to be lonelier than women from early adulthood right through to old age. They are more likely to agree that 'I often feel very lonely'; 'People don't come to visit me as much as I'd like'; 'I don't have anyone I can confide in'; and 'I don't have anyone to lean on in times of trouble' (Flood 2005, p. vii).

This gender pattern remains irrespective of comparisons between men and women living alone or in household shared with others. 'While men are

generally lonelier than women, the difference is much greater in the case of men living alone' (Flood 2005, p. vii).

Why are men so vulnerable? Part of the answer must draw on kinship and marriage norms. Men often leave the largely male company of their bachelor days when they form partnerships and joint households. Frequently, their new social circle is predominantly drawn from their wives' circle of friends and family. Thus when partnership breakdown occurs, and it occurs more frequently now, men are left less supported than women.

> Separation and divorce do have an indirect effect on social isolation among men. Men tend to have fewer close persons in their primary social networks than women, and are more likely to nominate their spouse or partner as the person to whom they feel closest. In couple households men are more likely to rely both on the direct support of their partners and on the greater social network maintained by those partners. But if they separate or divorce, men's levels of social support return to the low levels experienced by their single counterparts.

In addition, Flood (2005, p. viii) continues,

> The data suggests that men rely on their wives or de facto partners for their emotional and social needs to a greater extent than women who draw on wider sources of support. Men in most couple households experience far higher levels of personal support than men who live alone, but this is not as true for women. While women in childless couple households also report high levels of support, women in couple households with young children report levels similar to those experienced by women who live by themselves. This finding suggests that a relationship with a spouse or intimate partner is a more important source of support for men than it is for women. In short, men need women more than women need men.

Relationship

Stack's (1998) comparative study of marriage, family and loneliness in seventeen countries had similar results: 'while marriage appears to lower loneliness for men and women, the association is stronger for men'. Bauman's claim that the problem lies with the nature of the bond, namely its erosion, is supported to a degree by Stack's comparative study. Stack (1998) tested the association between marriage (as against cohabitation) and loneliness in 17 nations. It was found that marriage is associated with a lower level of loneliness than singleness for the whole sample and for 15 of the seventeen countries tested. Significantly however, Stack (1998) found higher levels of loneliness among cohabiting couples 'indicating that companionship alone does not account for the protective nature of marriage' (p. 415) and that 'the quality of marital relationship may be higher than the quality of cohabitation' and that 'there may be a higher level of intimacy and companionship in marriage than cohabitation' (p. 428). As Stack observes, more work is needed on this topic.

Loneliness and Internet use

As we have seen Bauman is not convinced by those who argue that the Internet is reconnecting contemporary individuals to equivalent forms of social interaction. Indeed he sees the recourse to connectivity as an inevitably doomed substitute. According to his analysis of this new form of social relationship based on *connectivity* we might expect Internet users to experience loneliness all the while they work hard at connectivity. This is because while communicative traffic might be busy, bonds are by definition, not part of the equation/deal. Individuals only experience the relations while on line, which is an extreme contrast to the social bond that endures, without inconstancy, irrespective of intensity of interaction, juxtaposition, absence or presence. Despite this the Internet is used a great deal for social interactions. In the EU for example, emailing family, friends or colleagues is easily the most important use of the Internet – 58 per cent of Europeans use it for this purpose (Spardaro 2002).

There are a handful of recent studies of Internet use and loneliness. Arguably the most specific and sophisticated study is the UCLA-based team headed by Michael Suman. Their results from a 2096 randomly generated sample in the US using the most widely used UCLA Loneliness Scale are clear (Coget *et al*. 2002, p. 193):

> among Internet users, socializing online is associated with an increased level of loneliness, … independent of its impact on people's social networks. This result is particularly surprising since it would be expected that the

> more friends people have (either face-to-face or online) the less lonely they are. This hypothesis is verified in the case of face-to-face friends, but there is a positive, significant correlation between online socializing and loneliness, which is very surprising.

Or is it? Those who opt for online socializing are engaging in the exchange of messages, information, humour, all sorts of things but they are not establishing a relationship that might be construed as a bond. As Bauman argues, there is nothing once you go off line, or others go 'off line' on you. To repeat his words: 'The unions have nothing to lean on but our chatting and texting; the union only goes so far as the dialling, talking, messaging. Stop talking – and you are out. Silence equals exclusion' (Bauman 203, p. 35).

Significantly it is not just texting that people log on for. According to Datamonitor (cited in Yoder *et al*. 2005, p. 23), 'over half of all spending on the Internet is related to sexual activity'. In absolute terms, this amounts to 30 million Americans logging on per day, driving a USD 6.2 billion industry – which exceeds the combined revenues of the ABC, CBS and NBC. Yoder *et al*.'s study of a sample of 400 pornography users in the US (men and women), clearly demonstrated a statistical link between pornographic use measured in days per week and loneliness although, again, they are not sure why this is. But it is fairly clear that while people clearly reach out to cyberspace for contact with fellow humans, and succeed, what they do not succeed in is creating bonds. Loneliness seems to be made all the more keenly felt when sustained efforts are made, when there seem to be so many people in one's life, and yet none of them mean very much to you, or you to them.

It is highly likely that general principles of motivation in a consumer society, namely the wish to be in a permanent state of desire, to exercise choice and never to be harnessed in permanent and demanding relationships is one of the key reasons why Internet use has grown so significantly in recent years. Over time these consumerist habits of Internet use become normalized giving rise to a pattern of social interaction that is increasingly isolated. Compared to obtaining the desired sexual satisfaction via face-to-face relationships that have historically been tied to enduring bonds (of varying length), it may be that the Internet is simply easier and cleaner and with no obligation whatsoever, apart from small and affordable hits on a credit card.

All of the above concerns the extent to which Internet relationships can substitute for what Bauman refers to as the bond, and it seems that they fall short of constituting similar types of bond in a number of ways. However it should be recognized that the Internet does of course make connectivity between people who might otherwise remained socially isolated (e.g. those with no place-based community; some elderly people, some people with disability and some discriminated-against people) (Shaw and Gant 2002; Whitty and McLaughlin 2005; Shapira *et al*. 2007; Fokkema and Knipscheer 2007).

Loneliness and companion animals

> Pets were company for the lonely, relaxation for the tired and compensation for the childless.
>
> (Keith Thomas 1983, p. 118, summing up the place of companion species in England, 1500–1800)

I have argued before that one reason for the dramatic growth in pet keeping, especially keeping cats and dogs, as well as the change of term from 'pet' to 'companion animal', can be explained by the crisis of intimacy, love and companionship in Western societies (Franklin 1999). According to Keith Thomas (1983) pet keeping, in its modern sentimental form, first started among British royalty and senior aristocracy of the seventeenth century. As a social group highly isolated from others as well as each other, loneliness was a characteristic of their lives from childhood onwards. Their regard for their pets bordered on the scandalous at times, particularly their inclination to spoil them in times of famine and poverty. The legacy of these relationships is captured well through portraiture, with family scenes rarely painted in the absence of favoured animals – and even specially commissioned portraits of the pets themselves. It is also captured by the highly unusual habit of giving them human names, a practice that was not repeated outside these circles until very recent times (see Franklin 1999).

In a previous book *Animals and Modern Cultures* I argued that those in Western Anglophone societies who have suffered family trauma and who find themselves alone and possibly socially and physically insecure or isolated often acquire companion animals, particularly dogs and cats (Franklin 1999). Clearly, people believe that their loneli-

ness will be alleviated by animal companionship (and as I will show, companionship is the single biggest reason given for acquiring a dog, a cat or a bird) and indeed, the most sophisticated research using the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale found that participants living entirely alone were more lonely than those living with pets.

A recent national survey (Franklin 2006) found that the key reason for obtaining a dog, cat or bird was for company. Eighty per cent of married and de facto households with dogs chose them for their company. Pet keeping responds to transformations in family and lifecycle change. In divorced or separated households the proportion buying dogs for company rose to 88 per cent, in widowed households to 90 per cent and among the retired 91 per cent.

In *Animals and Modern Cultures* I also argued that a number of indicators show that companion animals have been increasingly brought closer to their human friends in emotional and social terms, indeed, that they are now often reckoned to be part of the family. I therefore asked whether respondents considered any of their animals to be members of *their* family. This not only indicates the surrogacy of animals for significant human relationships but it also indicates a breakdown in the perceived difference between humans and non-humans. This translation is commonly referred to as *anthropomorphism*, or the attribution of human-like qualities that are merely whimsical fantasies of the human imagination to animals. This may be so but it is not necessarily so. If people are merely extending to animals, as animals, the notion of belonging, and recognizing close bonds with them as equivalent to those within (former) human families then this is not a case of anthropomorphism, it is a case of translation and hybridization: hybridization of the family. Unproblematic similarities might include on-going co-residence, commitment, enduring ties, emotional inter-dependence, friendship, company and shared activities. Where this happens it is important to realize that it is not a one-way, human-orchestrated attribution but one built of close feelings and emotions self-evidently expressed also by the animals themselves (Haraway 2008). The overwhelming majority of Australians (88 per cent of households) did ascribe family membership to their pets. Some places were well above this average such as Perth and Hobart (94 per cent) and Melbourne, rural Western Australia and rural Victoria (91 per cent).

These findings are supported by new data on the changing nature of pets and household space. The inner sanctum of homes, once the preserve of humans and protected against use by domestic animals, has been breached in a big way. Chairs and bedrooms, once redolent with the symbolism of solid and important human relations, are now inhabited by animal companions.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that in the 1950s and before, animals were largely kept out of the home, sleeping in kennels and on verandas. Today this is very much not the case. In my 2001 survey on human–animal relations in Australia I scaled questions according to where animals were allowed in the home, from the backyard at one extreme to the bedroom and on furniture, including beds, at the other. Over half of respondents claimed their companion animals were allowed in their bedroom and 35 per cent allowed animals in their children's bedroom. Forty-eight per cent of households allowed animals on their furniture. Seventy-six per cent allowed their animals into the family room or lounge, 62 per cent allowed their animals in the room where they eat and 66 per cent allowed animals into the kitchen. In other words companion animals mostly have the run of the house as equal domestic partners.

There is considerable evidence to show that companion animals can be highly beneficial to human wellbeing, particularly to those whose bonds with other humans are absent. In 1992 Anderson *et al*. found that in a survey of those attending a cardiovascular screening service (n = 5,741) in Melbourne, pet owners reported significantly fewer visits to doctors and significantly less consumption of specified medications (for high blood pressure, high cholesterol, sleeping difficulties or heart problems). Pet owners had 'significantly lower systolic blood pressure and plasma triglycerides than non-owners' but the two groups 'did not differ in body mass index, socio-economic indicators, or smoking habits' (Jennings *et al*. 1998, p. 163). Moreover, pet owners in the study ate more meat and take-out food. Since then numerous international follow-up studies have largely confirmed these findings (Friedmann 1995; Heady 1999; Friedmann *et al*. 2000).

Using 1994–1995 Medicare[3] expenditure and assuming that all recurrent health expenditure can be divided up *proportionately* to the number of doctor visits people make, Headey (1998) calculated the savings from having companion animals

to be AUD 988 million, representing 2.7 per cent of the nation's health expenditure. However, as we enter a new phase of more intensive and detailed study of this phenomenon, the benefits may be more significant as a result of being able to direct them more effectively in the population through training and supervision. For example, Jennings *et al*. (1998) strongly suggest that the critical benefit may not be from ownership per se but from specific types of relationship, especially those resembling the human bond. They found, for example, that 'non-partnered people who reported feeling close to their dogs made significantly fewer doctor visits and took less medication than non-partnered people who were not close to their dogs' (Jennings *et al*. 1998, p. 168).

However, although current levels of emotional dependency upon dogs and cats may be unprecedented the companionship and bond on which they are based are primordial, and part of what Haraway (2008) calls the 'co-constitution' of both species. In this sense, we can at least dispense with the thought that companionate relationships between humans and non-humans are problematic or an aberration; or, merely a failure of modern humanity. One of the interesting things about contemporary relationships with dogs, for example, is the *confidence* with which humans can *now* speak of their bond with them. As I argued before (see Franklin 1999) this has not always been the case. Humanists such as Jean Paul Sartre railed against the sentimentality of Parisian graves for pet dogs, and reported to being with an American friend who kicked and damaged a concrete funerary dog statue. For Sartre (1967, p. 112), loving a dog was a failure of humanity: 'when you love … dogs *too much,* you love them instead of adults.'

Loneliness: why should we care? What's at stake?

Keeping companion animals not only alleviates loneliness but it has been shown beyond doubt to offer protection against a series of significant illnesses, especially circulatory disease and depression among older people. But what if loneliness goes on unabated – what is at stake then?

There is now very good evidence to suggest that loneliness is implicated in physical illness. According to Geller (2000), lonely people are four times more likely than others to have a heart attack, and four times more likely to die from it. Significantly perhaps, 'smokers are only twice as likely as non-smokers to die from a heart attack' (Gellner 2000, p. 3). Further, loneliness doubles the chance of catching a cold, is correlated with behavioural problems including suicide, alcohol abuse, deteriorated health, depression, sleep problems, disturbed appetite as well as backaches, headaches and nausea (de Jong Gierveld 1998; Stack 1998; Fees *et al*. 1999; Geller 2000). Lonely people use emergency services 60 per cent more often than the non-lonely and as elderly people are twice as likely to be admitted into nursing homes over a four year period (Stack 1998, p. 2).

Conclusions

I do not intend to offer solutions to the problem of loneliness by way of my concluding remarks. Partly this is because my aim is mainly to alert people to its origins, extent and consequences but also its rather social, spatial and emotional content that is specific to liquid modernity. But partly it is because unlike in the 1960s and 1970s it is not a question of building towns and neighbourhoods differently, or supporting regional economies or establishing new social services. Rather, as I have argued above, it is more the result of the exercise of freedom and choice and the new hedonism that characterizes contemporary liquid modernity. In liquid modernity loneliness is the price we pay for our freedom and choice since, given that it is extended to everyone, there is nothing at all to stop those who love you now, who support you now, who employ you now, from dumping you the minute they become bored of you or find a better alternative.

It is most likely that the bond has gone forever, past its usefulness as just another artefact of human evolution; belonging to one but not all phases of our social history. Whether we will progress, as Houellebecq imagines, to a stage of technical and emotional mastery of a fully individuated, self-satisfied, asocial life is a question before us. But I will say only one word on this. Houellebecq's neohumans gave it away when they also took Fox, a small corgi, with them into the next phase …

Notes

1. Bauman seems here to deliberately include together both networking as face-to-face activity and networking on computers. The point being that they share a common looseness in the relationships they established that are simultaneously active and inactive.
2. There are good reasons to suppose that underreporting of

loneliness is quite extensive. This is because it is often thought of as a failing or might be construed as a failing. According to Victor *et al*. (2006) who conducted both qualitative and quantitative studies of the same sample, respondents did under report loneliness. While 38% reported significant loneliness to the quantitative study, 58% reported loneliness to the qualitative study.

3. Medicare is the name of Australian Government's publically funded health care system.

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