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## ARTICLE

# Loneliness and interaction ritual theory: failed interaction chains among Finnish university students

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This article relates loneliness to interaction ritual theory, understanding loneliness in terms of problematic microinteractional dynamics. The advantage of interaction ritual theory is that it extends our understanding of the issue of the psychologised self and related questions such as how loneliness feels or is experienced. Loneliness is here defined as a response to interaction representing relational understanding of emotions. Interaction ritual theory is interested in the emotional consequences that individuals experience from successful or unsuccessful interaction rituals. Loneliness in this view represents a state in which the individual is denied access to rewarding aspects of interaction. This study is based on 32 lifecourse interviews with Finnish students. It finds that loneliness as a failed microinteractional dynamic originates from students' previous negative experiences of interaction, problematic situational settings and the structured flow of students' daily activities.

**Key words** interaction ritual theory • Randall Collins • loneliness • university students • emotions

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Loneliness is understood to be an epidemic in today's societies; its significance and volume are described as increasing by policy makers, the media and a growing body of research. This study seeks to conceptualise loneliness through interaction ritual theory (Collins, 1990; 2004; Summers-Effler, 2002). Drawing on 32 qualitative lifecourse interviews, the article focuses on Finnish university students. Students in general may be vulnerable to situational loneliness, because they are undergoing a period of transition and change. They may be living alone, or with flatmates or partners, and for the first time in their lives having to cope on their own, which can be emotionally demanding (for example, Shaver et al, 1985; Stokes, 1985; Osterman, 2001; Deniz, 2005; Sawir et al, 2008).

Although all micro theories of loneliness recognise the relational contexts in which it emerges, they nevertheless often focus on 'the self' in terms of how loneliness is

experienced, rather than on (what happens in) relationships or interactions. For instance, much of the more phenomenological research on loneliness has focused on loneliness as lived experience – that is, the meaning, definition, essence and feeling of loneliness (Dahlberg, 2007; Franklin et al, 2019) – for instance, among older people (Tiilikainen and Seppänen, 2017; Sundström et al, 2018; Cohen-Mansfield and Eisner, 2020). This is consistent with the idea that emotions or loneliness can be located ‘inside of people’s heads’ and in the ‘sphere of subjectivity’, which is linked to the ‘experiencing or feeling subject’ (see Emirbayer and Goldberg, 2005: 486; see also Burkitt, 2002). Such views are partly based on the idea that emotions related to loneliness are embodied substances – that is, individual properties.

Microsociological and interaction ritual theory enables the exploration of loneliness as failed interaction. The dynamics of interaction processes have received relatively little interest in the study of loneliness. The advantage of interaction ritual theory and its conceptualisation of emotional energy is that they look beyond the issue of the psychologised self and related questions such as how loneliness feels or is experienced. Interaction ritual theory focuses more on the emotional consequences of the flow of daily interaction: it is interaction that defines loneliness as a phenomenon. Microsociological understanding of loneliness highlights the sphere of everyday life; that is, the flow of daily practices, networks and meetings as well as contextual settings.

Interaction ritual theory ‘is a theory of social dynamics’ (Collins, 2004: 42). It points out that individuals expect and desire positive emotions such as joy, enthusiasm and satisfaction from their social relationships, and the maximisation of their emotional energy in interactions. Loneliness ‘exists to the extent that a person’s network of social relationships is smaller or less satisfying than the person desires’ (Peplau and Perlman, 1982: 32). Interaction ritual theory pays attention to failed microinteractional dynamics, focusing on how chains of daily encounters contribute to the up-and-down flow of emotional energy (Collins, 2004), and how this relates to loneliness with regard to unsatisfying social relationships and reduced motivation to join others. My research questions are therefore: how does loneliness arise from interactions in daily life? How do university students link loneliness to failed interaction?

The study defines loneliness in terms of the interaction dynamics. To begin with I refer to previous research on the phenomenon of loneliness; I then move on to discuss the advantages of ritual interaction theory in understanding loneliness. The next section introduces data and methods. The final sections deal with students’ previous negative experiences of past interactions, problematic situational settings and investment in daily practices, which do not support the formation of friendship.

## **Previous research on loneliness**

An enormous number of large-scale, cross-sectional medical and psychological studies have captured the correlation between loneliness and physical or psychological damage. The relationship between loneliness and negative health consequences – such as increased mortality rates (Holt-Lunstad et al, 2010), cardiovascular health risks (Caspi et al, 2006; Hawkey and Cacioppo, 2010), high blood pressure (Hawkey et al, 2010) and problems with sleep, which in turn affect immune functioning (Jaremka et al, 2013; Matthews et al, 2017) – can also be linked to psychological changes in early childhood and issues such as social isolation, rejection and feelings of loneliness in childhood (Hawkey and Cacioppo, 2010). The research indicates that

individuals suffering from loneliness have a heightened fearful perception of rejection and threat from others and their environment (Junttila et al, 2015). Loneliness has a significant effect on individuals' mental health and cognitive and emotional functions, including depression, personality disorders, psychosis and schizophrenia (Seeman, 2000; Hawkley and Capaccio, 2010; Rokach, 2013). Loneliness plays a role in suicide, self-harm, substance abuse, eating disorders and delinquency (Heinrich and Gullone, 2006; Levine, 2012; Junttila et al, 2015). Psychological studies pay attention to the role of personality traits such as shyness, neurosis or introversion in relation to loneliness (for example, Peplau and Perlman, 1982; Stokes, 1985). Most (though not all) of these studies – which focus on subjective feelings of loneliness – are based on the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al, 1980), which measures satisfaction with social relationships through a questionnaire posing statements such as 'there are people I can talk to' and 'I feel left out'.

While psychological research has probably dominated the study of loneliness, there has also been sociological research on the structural aspects of loneliness – that is, in relation to social inequality and poverty (Lauder et al, 2006; Helliwell et al, 2016). One's socioeconomic position, and phenomena such as unemployment, marginalisation and exclusion, narrow the scope of everyday life and interaction, and tend to increase the experience of being lonely.

There has been a lack of microsociological theorisation on interaction, even though the success or failure of microinteractional dynamics is arguably central to how individuals learn to psychologically and socially perceive and construct meanings in their near environment. The construction of perceptions and meanings has an effect on individuals' bodies, influencing the autonomic nervous system, hormones and gene functioning (Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010). These perceptions and meanings are constructed in interaction situations, and Collins' work (2004) highlights the emotional and bodily consequences of interaction such as excitement, confidence or depression, and alienation. Daily face-to-face interactions and relationships are at the heart of the experience of loneliness but have been neglected by psychological and macrosociological research alike. The approach here draws attention to the failed microinteraction dynamics making the sphere of everyday life and the interaction chains central with regard to sociological understanding of loneliness.

## **Interaction ritual theory and emotional energy**

When it comes to microsociological theorisation of loneliness, the advantage of Collins's (2004) interaction ritual theory is that it highlights how individuals are affected by the positive or negative outcomes of interactions in the form of emotional energy. Successful social interactions and rituals are central to individuals' emotional wellbeing and flourishing. Interaction rituals can provide individuals with positive energy and a sense of meaning and connection with a larger group, such as at a great concert or exciting football match. Collins's work (2004) has been criticised for giving too much emphasis to dramatic examples of emotional energy, such as hockey matches or terrorist attacks (Davis and Bellochi, 2019). However, emotional energy can be an undramatic aspect of taken-for-granted experiences on which individuals do not constantly reflect in their daily lives.

Informal situations and microinteractions, such as face-to-face conversations, are also important ritual actions and are central in terms of emotional energy. Their

features include rhythmic coordination, mutual focus and positive emotional arousal, which all generate feelings of solidarity with others (Collins, 2004). Interaction ritual theory sees rituals as ‘focused interaction’ and a key factor in social dynamics (Summers-Effler, 2006: 135). For Goffman (1967), interaction rituals are characterised by mutually focused attention and a shared emotional mood that creates a shared reality for (at least two) participants.

This is central to feelings of group membership and solidarity. Successful interaction generates ‘a high degree of emotional entrainment – through bodily synchronisation, mutual stimulation/arousal of participants’ nervous systems’, which in turn evokes feelings of belonging and membership that are connected to ‘cognitive symbols’ (Collins, 2004: 42). Overall, this gives actors emotional energy.

Along with highly intense interaction rituals and conversational face-to-face networks, Collins finds thinking (imaginary and internal conversations) as interaction rituals taking place in the mind (Collins, 2004: 183). Thinking is often related to external situations originating from overt interaction chains (Collins, 2004: 184). This refers to a process in which symbolic and emotional ingredients of social interaction are internalised in thinking (Collins, 2004). Thinking produces emotional energy as well.

Emotional energy is similar to the psychological concept of ‘drive’, but emotional energy entails a more social orientation (Collins, 2004). High emotional energy is linked to feelings of confidence and enthusiasm that make individuals seek social interaction (Collins, 2004). Individuals seek emotional energy when they join and network with others. In interaction ritual theory, ‘emotional energy’ refers to the long-term outcomes of social interaction. It is something that individuals carry with them from interaction to interaction: successful interaction increases emotional energy, while failed interaction depletes it (Summers-Effler, 2006). Emotional energy can be thought of along a continuum that can be high, as in feelings of enthusiasm, high self-esteem and confidence – or low, when it is characterised by depression, alienation and feelings of draining energy, indicating that in these cases individuals are aware of their emotional states (Collins, 2004).

The consequences of failed interactions become manifested as a lack of group solidarity, no sense of one’s identity being confirmed, or no heightened emotional energy among others (Collins, 2004: 51). Unsuccessful interaction rituals indicate low emotional energy, which for Collins (1990) means that interaction is experienced negatively leading to a desire to avoid interaction altogether. According to Collins (2004: 44) ritual action theory is ‘a theory of individual motivation’ in which focus of analysis is on situations and whether they are attractive or unattractive in terms of emotional energy.

## **Loneliness and emotional energy**

Loneliness can be understood to refer to problems in the microdynamics of face-to-face interactions, and can be understood partly as a state in which individuals are inhibited from gaining positive emotional energy from interaction. Individuals are ‘neurologically wired to respond to each other; and [...] social situations that call forth these responses are experiences [are] highly rewarding’ (Collins, 2004: 78).

In loneliness, however, access to these rewarding aspects of social interaction is denied. This is either because there is a lack of face-to-face interaction – as in the case of social loneliness, which means a lack of social networks and a sense of not

belonging to the group (Weiss, 1973) – or because the microinteractional dynamic fails for some reason, as in the case of emotional loneliness. In emotional loneliness, individuals lack emotionally satisfying relationships or intimacy (Weiss, 1973). In other words, in emotional loneliness, individuals consistently feel alone with regard to all forms of interaction, which lowers their emotional energy. In social loneliness, they do not have enough interaction in their everyday lives for a satisfying accumulation of emotional energy.

Individuals seek positive and rewarding emotional experiences from social interaction. This creates a more permanent *feelings* that in turn is carried over to other situations, increasing individuals' longer-term emotional wellbeing (for example, Turner and Stets, 2005). Hausmann et al (2011: 322) suggest that 'actors operate within an EE [emotional energy] market, for the most part unconsciously searching for openings in the interaction ritual market for interactions that they anticipate will result in more EE'. In cases of loneliness, there are fewer such openings.

Loneliness as an experience, particularly chronic loneliness, can mean that low levels of emotional energy are built through interactions throughout the individual's lifecourse. Chronic loneliness 'is a more stable state that results from the inability of the individual to develop satisfying social relationships over the years' (Shiovitz-Ezra and Ayalon, 2010: 2). In a similar vein, according to Collins (2004), emotional energy is a strong, relatively persistent emotion that lasts for a longer period of time. Low emotional energy manifests itself in passivity and depression, indicating withdrawal and low initiative (Collins, 2004).

To describe loneliness in terms of failed interaction rituals is to recognise the emergence of negative emotional states in the microdynamic interactions and sanctions that individuals receive from ritual actions. As a consequence, failed interactions produce the feeling of having no group solidarity, no positive rewards for the affirmation of identity, no respect for group symbols, and no increase in emotional energy. This might manifest itself either in

disinterest in ritual action or in a worsening emotional mood connected to a sense of strain, boredom, constraint and the desire to leave (Collins, 2004). When interaction – or chains of interaction – fails, individuals may start constantly thinking about these interactions – that is, reliving them in their heads, and the outcome is a certain type of emotional energy that is produced in an introspective process. Interaction ritual theory is interested in how certain typical emotions – such as fear, anxiety, helplessness and shame – arise from repeated patterns of failed interaction and thinking and introspection related to that, creating a basis for a longer-term emotional tone such as depression, which for Collins (2004) is a typical emotional response to the loss of membership.

## Data and method

### *Study context*

The data are based on lifecourse interviews with 32 university students aged 18–35 who described themselves as experiencing loneliness. The data were gathered in autumn 2016 by the Student Life, the university's organisation to promote students' wellbeing (see Student Life, 2020). Student Life was motivated to scrutinise the experience of loneliness among students by its concern that this was a serious

problem at the university. The university is a multidisciplinary research university with 14,700 students. It is popular with students from different regions of Finland. This means that the majority of students are starting from scratch when they begin to familiarise themselves with the university and their studies, make friends and form new everyday activities. The campus, classes, lectures and group work provide a basis for everyday interaction.

### *Data collection and selection*

Interviewees were recruited through online forms distributed on the university's email lists and social media; these proved to be effective channels, as nearly one hundred students volunteered (although not all were interviewed, due to limited resources). Prospective interviewees were approached by the research team and provided with essential information about the study. The interviews were carried out in private rooms and lasted between 38 and 90 minutes.

The profile of the interviewees was consistent with university students in general: some were in their first year of university, while the oldest had been at the university for eight years. The majority fell between these two extremes. When the data were anonymised by the Student Life, it was decided not to give the exact ages of the research participants, in order to protect their privacy. Instead, their ages were segmented into the age groups of 18–24, 25–29 and 30–35 years. Age may have an effect on loneliness, because first-year students who have only recently left their childhood homes experience different circumstances from older students. Several students already had degrees and were older than 20 when they started their studies at this university. The overall majority of interviewees were from other regions of Finland; only three students originally came from nearby.

The interviewees were asked about their childhood family and peer relationships, and whether they had experienced themselves as lonely as a child or later; about their everyday routines, practices and relationships; and about their studies and activities at the university, from their first day to their current situation. Several questions were related to loneliness and how it appeared in their everyday lives.

Approximately half the interviewees had experienced loneliness in childhood or later youth. Roughly the same number stated that they had experienced mental health problems, most commonly depression. Nearly all the participants had experiences of being bullied or excluded from their peer group at school. Half the interviewees had problematic relationships with family, which included for instance parents who were alcoholic, or who were distant due to divorce or personality issues. Nevertheless, nearly all interviewees had social contacts in their daily lives; half the interviewees had partners. None of the research participants suffered from substance abuse, and the overall majority participated in sports in their leisure time.

### *Thematic analysis*

My method was theory-based thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which aims to identify, analyse and report patterns within the data. The data were analysed in the light of theoretical knowledge provided by interaction ritual theory. For Collins (2004: 44), this is a 'dynamic microsociology' that traces 'situations and their pull or push for individuals who come into them'. I conducted 'a detailed analysis

of some aspect of the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 84), during which the data were coded in terms of situations that generated dysfunctional microinteractional dynamics related to the research questions. I gathered together all expressions in the data that dealt with factors related to the experience of loneliness. Next, meaningful units of text (that is, codes) were formed, and texts that dealt with the same issue were grouped together; these groups were then further grouped under themes (that is, repeated patterns of meaning). The general goal was to find the most central and commonest themes. Three themes were identified in the data that played the most central role in the participants' experience of loneliness and to which I paid careful attention: previous interaction situations; interaction settings or contexts; and research participants' choices and activities in terms of the interaction situations they encountered in their daily lives (see also Välimäki 2018).

### **Theme 1: negative previous experiences of interaction situations and their consequences**

This section shows how negative experiences of previous interactions played a central role in defining how university students felt or acted in microinteractional ritual actions, at the university or elsewhere. This indicates the importance for future interactions of earlier microinteractional dynamics and their influence on the up-and-down flow of emotional energy. In the data these negative experiences were most often related to experiences of being bullied at school or excluded from peer groups. Nearly all interviewees mentioned these experiences. Although physical violence was rare in the data, these interviewees had encountered name-calling, or had been ridiculed and laughed at.

Bullying and peer rejection crush the spirit. This is the case for Jerry, a fourth-year student who has suffered from moderate depression for ten years. Jerry moved to a very small town at the age of seven. He was excluded from his school peer group and left alone during playtimes, with no one to turn to:

'So you did not exactly find friends, and when I went to school and I was elsewhere, and I hadn't been at the same nursery school as the others, I was an outsider and complete freak. They could not include me in their group, as I was already an outsider. So they excluded me the whole year [...]. So I got used to it that when you tried to approach others, they told you, more or less frankly, go away.' (Jerry, 18–24)

Negative interactional situations were experienced by Jerry not just at school but everywhere else too, and even when he tried new hobbies, he was bullied; he was not able to make friends. His experience was also related to power games, where being bullied or excluded from the group indicates subordination (Collins, 2004; 2019), with all the emotional consequences that follow.

Jerry's experiences suggest problematic chains of interaction rituals where repeated exposure to failed interaction such as being excluded the whole year in school indicates that he experienced more than one problematic interaction for a long duration. Chains of interaction where Jerry felt excluded were indicative of moments where he most likely experienced a long-term loss of emotional energy (for example, Collins, 1990).



Jerry is – in his own words – incapable of getting to know people at university, as he has not had much practice; he says he has not ‘grown into contact’.

Negative experiences also start to guide expectations in the longer term. The experience of being bullied – through which individuals are denied legitimacy to be who they are – leads to a vicious circle of interaction. Many interviewees said that they were not sufficiently competent or skilful to join others: they self-monitored and saw themselves negatively, and they expected others to see them negatively too. This led to avoidance of interaction and withdrawal to a safe space.

A few participants have tried hard to make friends, at university and elsewhere; but despite their efforts, they have not succeeded. For example, Jessica, who has been lonely for a long time and says that her family members are lonely as well, had tried to make friends. But when she realised that she was in danger once again of being excluded from the group, she made a decision to stop trying:

‘As an experience, giving up felt liberating, even though it did not resolve my feelings of not belonging, it has given me [becomes very emotional] ... fuck, I’m sorry. [...], but giving up meant that I received mercy, when you are not enough and when you do not have to care any longer. It has taken the edge off.’ (Jessica, 18–24)

Jessica no longer invests time and energy in microinteractional situations that have not proven to be successful, such as trying to make friends. She was not intensely bullied at school, but she was ignored and excluded from the group. These negative experiences mean that she has always had the feeling of not being able to make friends as easily as others. She says she ‘lacks the code’. For Jessica, dramatic aspects of emotional energy, such as high-intensity painful emotional responses to repeated rejection, are transformed into less dramatic, lower-intensity emotional energy through the process of ‘giving up’, which generates self-compassion.

At the time of the present study, Jessica finds it difficult to start new hobbies such as sports, because she is alone: she does not want to enter other people’s company, as she suffers from a fear of rejection based on earlier negative experiences. The cost of joining has grown too high for her. Chains of interaction in Jessica’s lifecourse have taught Jessica that these interactions corrode her level of emotional energy (see [Summers-Effler, 2002: 43](#)).

Jessica feels most lonely when she realises that she is excluded from more dramatic interactional rituals, such as a graduation party – which she is not able to organise for herself, as no one would come – or other situations such as a hen party, or a wedding. These are highly energised, high-intensity dramatic events that for her represent aspects of social life that she cannot share with anyone. She does not mind eating lunch alone at university, as she is already used to it. During lunch breaks she experiences the undramatic, low-intensity form of emotional energy that characterises taken-for-granted experiences of everyday life (see [Collins, 2004](#); [Davis and Bellocchi, 2019](#)). Jessica’s example also indicates how past microinteractional dynamics tend to guide and inform individuals in their everyday choices, and how certain actions that lead to certain outcomes start to negatively accumulate over time, creating a certain type of everyday reality.

Sara tried to make contact with people when she arrived at university, but she noticed that others had already formed groups that she could not enter. She says she

always tries to make friends at first; she smiles and asks people how they are doing. In the past, she was clingy with some people, infringing too closely on their personal space, which led to rejection; she can read on their faces that she is not very welcome. This indicates that Sara had lacked the type of microsocial habits in the past ‘that play well in that environment’ (see [Collins, 2019](#): 46).

Sara has friends and acquaintances, but not close ones; she seeks a deeper connection and is not easily satisfied with superficial small talk. Like many others, she wonders what is wrong with her because no one wants to be her friend:

‘When you realise that it is Friday night at eight p.m. and no one has missed you. [...] It is quite a heavy blow to your self-esteem. So you are thinking, if I were different, would I have friends? Would I have people around me who would miss me? So it feels like I’m so bad that I’m not good for anyone.’  
(Sara, 18–24)

In the situation described above, Sara observes and reports her own thoughts ([Collins, 2004](#): 183–4). This example contains a ritual involving one person in which Sara produces emotional energy from her understanding of how Friday night should look (ideally a highly energised day of the week, when people are having fun), and how she misses this interaction. Loneliness seems to emerge as an outcome of these thoughts. These thoughts can be understood as intense, non-dramatic, negative emotional energy that is productive of loneliness. Loneliness is not only a product of failed or negative interaction, but it also involves subsequent rituals of introspection to complete the process. Disappointment and feelings of anger are common features of Sara’s emotional energy. She blames herself for not having any friends, and she is angry that she is not a better listener and does not have anything fun to say.

Repeated rejections from others – which for most started in childhood or early youth – have made the research participants cautious and self-monitoring. Earlier failed interaction chains have come to determine and restrict their choices and everyday lives, reinforcing their likelihood of being lonely in future.

## **Theme 2: problematic situational settings**

This section deals with problematic interaction chains in terms of the context within which interaction takes place. Student interactions within the university routine tend to be ready-made; it is different from school, giving students both more freedom and more control. Some – albeit a minority – of the interviewees found this difficult: they strongly felt that no one would care for or guide them at university if they failed or lagged behind in their studies. Students need to adjust to the university’s patterns of interaction and learn to self-organise their actions in the new environment. Young adults encounter new circumstances related to finances, accommodation and daily living problems, and also in terms of personal autonomy and identity ([Baker and Siryk, 1986](#); [Sawir et al, 2008](#)). It is typical for students to ‘experience both personal loneliness because of the loss of contact with families and social loneliness because of the loss of networks’ ([Sawir et al, 2008](#): 148).

It also seems that the university offers the participants a relatively loose schedule, with few lectures or meetings per week. “University is not a very easy place for grouping, because it is easy to study [for] a whole diploma without doing anything

with other people [...] university in itself does not offer possibilities for socialisation for students” (female, 25–29). It seems that those who spend a lot of their free time alone, including many of the male interviewees, do not have sufficient amounts of interaction in their daily lives. For Tony, time spent chatting with classmates at university is highly energising and enables him to escape from feeling alone. When he spends time alone at home for a few days without seeing anyone, the experience of loneliness and other negative thoughts emerge. It can be suggested that Tony fails to recharge his emotional energy repeatedly in interactions in order to sustain it at a sufficient level (see [Collins, 2004](#)). During these times of being alone, Tony is engaged in rituals of introspection that contribute to his experience of loneliness. Tony wishes he had a group of friends with whom to hang out.

Tony spends lot of time online: ‘I interact with others through the computer’. However, for Tony, online communication may not be as effective a medium for gaining emotional energy as face-to-face interaction. Online interaction can be experienced as emotionally meaningful in having the same types of benefits as face-to-face interaction, and it can create social bonds in certain settings, but Tony felt that something was missing in terms of the quality of social bonds (see [Bellocchi et al, 2016](#)).

He says that his online friends ease his loneliness to a certain extent, but not much, as he finds face-to-face interaction superior:

‘I’m guessing that when you are face-to-face with people, it has a different kind of effect on the brain. It releases certain different chemicals. I don’t know. I guess it is related to dopamine or something. I’m not able to say why it is. I’m not that familiar with it.’ (Tony, 18–24)

Online communication seems to lead to low emotional energy and is less emotionally fulfilling and energising for Tony. The use of technologies in Tony’s case does not replace bodily presence (see also [Collins, 2004](#)). Although some interviewees – mostly males – experience their online contacts as meaningful, these are not necessarily experienced as the emotionally intensive, highly energised encounters that would boost excitement and joy.

Like nearly all interviewees with only a few exceptions, Tony was critical of the significant role of alcohol in student culture. Most participants felt that alcohol was not for them: “Sometimes I feel that there is maybe too much drinking and it could be something else” (male, 18–24; “I stopped liking those student things where they drink a lot, so I stopped going to them” (male, 18–24; “I was not an alcohol consumer at all” (female, 18–24). Since alcohol and parties seemed to connect students, enabling them to make friends, the research participants felt they were left out of this. For many, the use of alcohol and parties can therefore be regarded as what [Collins \(2004: 53\)](#) calls ‘energy draining forced rituals’ – rituals that do not build collective effervescence. Parties are interaction rituals into which individuals are expected to ‘throw themselves enthusiastically’, investing time and energy to make the ritual succeed ([Collins, 2004: 53](#)). The research participants felt drained by the pressure to go to parties and drink heavily, and preferred to stay at home. Here, interaction is experienced as depressing, leading to a desire to avoid interaction. They were aware that their chances of finding new contacts and making friends were lowered.

However, this was experienced as preferable to attending parties and being forced to join in a ritual action that they did not enjoy.

First-year university students encounter new situational settings, and this forms the backdrop against which their interactions take place. The first year is a significant transition period – that is, a passage between life phases, from childhood to adulthood – in young adults' lives. The data indicate that this is a delicate process for many, and that problems at this stage tend to have an effect on students' later experiences of loneliness (see [Välimäki, 2018](#)). Nearly half of the interviewees had experienced some sort of transition problem: “When you come to university, there is grouping, you have to start immediately, if you miss that, it might be too late and it might be more difficult to get in” (male, 18–24); “If you skipped one class [...] then you started to lag behind” (male 18–24); “I started in [...] and about the same time I took sick leave” (female, 18–24). For these research participants, who can be thought of as ‘newcomers’, creating ‘enduring patterns of interactions’ seemed problematic (see [Summers-Effler, 2006: 147](#)). Failure to join a group at the beginning became influential on their later possibilities for interaction. For some interviewees this failure was because they were older than most of the other students: they already had a degree from elsewhere, or they had joined the master's programme relatively late, which made their life situation different from that of other students. For others, however, it was because they were unable to make friends, which they explained through self-failure and self-blame. The majority of participants found university problematic as a context, and this was related to mass lectures that offered few possibilities for interaction with others, or to the above-mentioned use of alcohol (see also [Välimäki, 2018](#)). In other words, interaction did not succeed because of external situational factors that were not beneficial to the research participants, or to which they did not have easy access.

### **Theme 3: structured flow of daily activities – efficient ideal students**

This section aims to show how the research participants' daily choices and patterns become problematic in terms of the formation of friendship. For some male interviewees, such as Tony, the experience of loneliness diminished when they took part in interactions with peers (that is, they experienced positive emotional energy when among others); for many female interviewees, the opposite was the case, and they tended to feel more alone when they were interacting with others (that is, those interactions drained emotional energy). Although most of the interviewees were female, which meant that their experiences dominated the data, it was possible to find differences in the structured flow of daily practices between males and females. Previous research has found differences between females and males in the experience of loneliness (for example, [Franklin et al, 2019](#)). It has been shown that rates of loneliness are higher among male than female students ([Deniz 2005](#); [Sawir et al, 2008](#)). In our data too, loneliness seemed to differ among students when it came to gender.

Male students tended to be more passive and inactive, lacked initiative, and had less interaction in their daily lives than female students. The vast majority of female students were the opposite of this: their flow of daily practices was highly structured and efficiently organised, indicating high levels of emotional energy, which nevertheless became dysfunctional for their emotional wellbeing and meaningful social relationships. In other words, they were emotionally but not socially lonely

(see Ernst and Cacioppo, 1999). Finnish girls generally tend to have more mental health problems and emotional symptoms than boys (Mishina et al, 2018). Although girls perform better at school and in other educational settings, and are less likely to become socially excluded or unemployed (Pyykkönen et al, 2017), they suffer from heavy stress related to their educational performance (Sweeting et al, 2010).

The female students typically studied hard, had boyfriends, played a lot of sport, and had jobs alongside their studies. Tessa and Paula were typical examples. Both had been studying at university for several years and expected to graduate soon. They both had boyfriends with whom they spent a lot of time. They usually spent their weekends somewhere other than the city, and they played a lot of sport. Tessa described how she spent her time:

‘There are of course housewarming parties and farewell parties and all those other things here in the city, and I miss them all, because I’m not here. And when I visit back home I work all Friday and Saturday nights, so I do not have time, when I have to sleep and everything, and focus on changing my [circadian] rhythm, and all the other things, so that I’m able to engage in my hobbies and then do work.’ (Tessa, 18–24)

Tessa did not have much spare time, and neither did Paula. Paula went jogging and to the gym together with her boyfriend. She liked studying and worked hard towards her life goals, which show initiative, determination and high energy. Wanting to have real, close friends, she had never found many friends at university, and she thought this was partly because she did not like drinking or partying and had so many other things to do. Paula engaged in activities that promised a large amount of emotional energy, such as doing sports and spending time with her boyfriend. In other words, Paula was active in other ways, and her means of achieving emotional energy were divided among different areas of her life because ‘there are different ways of gaining emotional energy, and there are overlapping/competing opportunities for each of these ways, the process of weighing outcomes in terms of emotional energy is complex’ (Summers-Effler, 2002: 43).

However, Paula experienced lower emotional energy when it came to face-to-face informal interaction rituals. It was important to Paula to have serious conversations, and as a good listener she sometimes felt “like a dustbin of human emotions” to whom people opened up about their personal problems without asking how she was doing herself. This indicates that Paula’s sense of identity was not affirmed in interaction, which is a common sign of failure of interaction ritual (Collins, 2004: 51). Although Paula had done self-work (or emotional work) to become more sociable, and she wanted to appear easily approachable, she thought that her experiences of bullying and peer rejection at school had made her self-monitoring; after conversations she often felt insecure about whether she had said or done the right thing. She had to try extra hard when talking to new people. It can be suggested that Paula lacked emotional energy to confidently join conversations and ‘get into the shared rhythm of interaction’ (Collins, 2019: 46). However, Paula still desires to join interaction, and past interactions have not been completely unfavourable to her. It seems that Paula’s lack of confidence is produced in rituals of introspection, where she analyses her interactions in a way that has a negative impact on her levels of emotional energy.

Paula's and Tessa's loneliness emerged when they realised that other students had successful chains of interactions. Other students had close friendships with one another, sharing a common language and sense of humour when they hung out together in their free time, talking about where they had been and what they were going to do next. Other students join interaction rituals, with a smooth rhythmic coordination and flow of verbal and non-verbal gestures that manifest as 'in' jokes, laughter, intimacy and positive rewards for those who are successful; but Paula and Tessa and some other female students in the data were outsiders and non-members of these interaction rituals, characterised by emotional depletion, draining and the feeling that they did not belong (for example, [Collins, 2004](#)). This was partly based on their location, as they were not at the centre – that is, intensively involved *sociometric stars* – but on the fringe, as someone who is barely a member or barely participating (see [Collins, 1990](#): 38).

In addition, Paula felt lonely when she thought about the fact that she did not have a group of friends whom she might invite to her wedding. A wedding is dramatic, intense, high-energy ritual that is culturally and personally meaningful and full of symbols. Yet, Paula's thought of the perfect and happiest day is disrupted, when she realises that there is no one there. In both of these cases – that is, wanting to have close friends with whom to have good conversations and wanting to invite friends to her wedding – loneliness emerges with regard to imagination and introspection. There is an imagined sense of shared feelings and solidarity. Perfect friendship and intimacy is created through introspection, but instead of heightened emotional energy, these thoughts lowered emotional energy, as there is a mismatch between reality and imagination and a lack of bodily presence of others.

## Discussion and conclusion

The study focused on interaction chains and what takes place in the flow of daily interactions. In this sense, loneliness is understood as a response to a situation and (missed or failed) interaction. The focus of microsociological theorisation cannot be limited to the meanings and feelings of loneliness, but must extend to daily interaction patterns. In phenomenological accounts, loneliness is defined in terms of absence ([Dahlberg, 2007](#); [Franklin et al, 2019](#)), as an 'emotional response to an absence rather than a readily identified event/change in one's life' ([Franklin et al, 2019](#): 129). Rather than dealing with loneliness in terms of a damaged self or self-identity, a personality trait (for example, [Peplau and Perlman, 1982](#); [Stokes, 1985](#)), a subjective inner psychological state or experiences and meanings – as something that is related to 'the whole of existence' ([Dahlberg, 2007](#): 205; see also [Cohen-Mansfield and Eisner, 2020](#)) – my article has drawn attention to failed interaction rituals. In other words, it treats emotions as patterns of relationships: they are 'active responses to a relational context' ([Burkitt, 2002](#): 151–2; see also [Emirbayer and Goldberg, 2005](#)).

Loneliness can here be defined as a state where individuals are incapable of gaining emotional energy from the microdynamics of interaction. My data analysis found that the process of receiving emotional energy was prevented for the participants, for various reasons. For some participants this was because they felt more alone when they interacted with others; this was characterised by the experience of 'not belonging' and a lack of meaningful connection or solidarity. Some interviewees reported that

they felt better if they regularly interacted with others, but that the possibilities for such interaction were limited.

First, the commonest reason behind students' difficulties in gaining emotional energy from microinteractional rituals was their negative experiences of earlier interactions, such as being bullied or excluded from a group, which generated negative expectations and emotions, such as fear, shame, depression and a sense of self-failure. The emotional tone of these research participants indicated a lack of initiative and passivity, which had a cumulative effect, further lowering their emotional energy. It is important to note that such failures in interaction did not take place only in the present, but went back a long way: earlier experiences affected a general emotional tone linked to failed interactional dynamics. It can be suggested that loneliness becomes 'built in' through repeated exposure to certain types of interactional dynamics.

Second, the university as an interaction setting was problematic for several reasons. It offered a lot of freedom and placed value on independence, and for some students this was difficult to handle, particularly if they had experienced problems during the transition stage at the beginning of their studies. The student culture of parties and alcohol as interaction rituals was also experienced as alienating.

Third, it seemed to be the case for most female students in the data that they were busy and efficient, and did not have much time for making friends. They were goal-oriented in their daily activities and interaction chains, such as doing sport or studying. The interviewees' structured time schedules included planning and caring for themselves and their future. However, intimate, satisfying friendships were a neglected and difficult aspect of their lives, leading to low emotional energy and states such as sadness and self-blame. Many of the female participants were unhappy about their relationships; they did not want superficial small talk, but rather wanted a real friend who would show interest in them and have good conversational skills. They were prone to perfectionism in their everyday lives, demanding a lot not only from themselves, but also from their relationships.

The study has scrutinised aspects that are dysfunctional for the achievement of individuals' emotional energy and wellbeing. Interaction ritual theory pays attention to daily interaction chains and microinteractional dynamics. It enables the identification of factors in the microinteractional dynamics of everyday life that lead not to the maximisation of emotional energy, but rather to a longer-term distribution of decreasing emotional intensity as an underlying tone.

This can mean that loneliness becomes a background emotion – that is, a constituent element of emotional energy (Davis and Bellocchi, 2019). Low emotional energy is an outcome of interactions that have failed for a long period of time (Collins, 2019). In the data, the positive flow of emotional energy was prevented either by insufficient amounts of the daily interaction that would maximise it – which in turn was related to decisions such as staying at home and not going onto campus – or by participation in microinteractional dynamics that did not serve the actors' interests or support their emotional wellbeing – typically, dynamics in which individuals experienced themselves as outsiders and non-members of the interaction group. The fact of spending time alone or lacking meaningful relationships did not free the participants from thinking internally about their relationships and interactions; *rather, it* produced emotional energy loaded with anxiety and stress. They were constantly reflecting on how they were seen by others: how their words and meanings were interpreted by their peers; whether they had said something stupid, unfunny or unamusing;

whether they were too eager, or too quiet, or spoke too much; whether they were bad listeners, or listened too much to others and neglected their own needs. They had started to believe that they were somehow flawed, and they wondered what it was that made them a failure in others' eyes.

This self-monitoring illustrates how thinking is shaped by internalisation of the external chains of interaction (see Collins, 2004: 184, 185) and which refers to a process in which failures and unmet expectations are relived through introspection, which lowers emotional energy. In this sense, loneliness does not only derive from negative or failed interaction, but from the intense process of introspection that follows from problematic interaction situations. Interaction and introspection are key elements that contribute to the experience of loneliness and are the central focus of the micro-sociological theorisation on loneliness. Future research could further explore rituals of introspection and the role they play in the phenomenon of loneliness. For future research, it would also be interesting to scrutinise neoliberal ideals such as efficiency, high self-demands (in terms of fitness and academic achievement, for example) and how neoliberal values lead to chains of interactions that seem to contribute to the experience of loneliness.

### Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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