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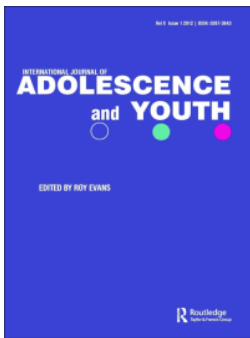
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## Loneliness – two sides to the story: adolescents’ lived experiences

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### ABSTRACT

Loneliness in adolescents is related to common mental health issues, and as a major global concern it is important to investigate loneliness from their own perspectives. The aim of this study was to explore how adolescents experience and describe negative and positive sides of loneliness. Data was collected through interviews with fifteen young Swedish-speaking Finns. Two main themes and seven subthemes were found. Negative experiences of involuntary loneliness were stressful and paralyzing giving rise to physical symptoms, emptiness, anxiety, fear and invisibility. Other negative experiences resulting from involuntary loneliness were shame, self-blame and self-contempt, as well as meaninglessness, hopelessness and exclusion. Positive experiences from self-chosen solitude were freedom, calmness and recovery, creativity and meaningfulness as well as reflection, recharging and personal growth.

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### KEYWORDS

Adolescents; interview; lived experiences; loneliness

## Introduction

### *Adolescents and loneliness*

A major global concern, loneliness in adolescents is related to common mental health issues such as depression or other emotional disorders (World Health Organization, 2019) and even suicide (Mental Health Foundation, 2010). While the highest levels of loneliness have been seen among the oldest old and young adults (Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016), evidence is emerging which indicates that adolescents are particularly predisposed to experiencing loneliness (Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016; Mental Health Foundation, 2010). Strang (2014) maintains that human beings have an inner desire to feel connected with and belong to others; since ancient times this is linked to survival and rooted in our genes. If a person’s social position is threatened or jeopardized, that person experiences stress (Strang, 2014). Consequently, enduring (long-term) loneliness impacts the immune system and cardiovascular function, which in terms of health impact can be compared to smoking (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2007).

Loneliness can be seen as an individual’s lived discontentment with present social relationships (De Jong-Gierveld, 1987; Perlman & Peplau, 1981), and it is characterized by negative feelings, such as sadness and pessimism (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2005). When people feel their social relationships are less satisfying than what they desire or they experience a situation where the intimacy they wish for is not realized, a sense of loneliness can arise, characterized as a distressful feeling (L. Peplau & Perlman, 1982; De Jong, 1987). Loneliness therefore constitutes a hurtful feeling due to a discrepancy between desired and achieved levels of social contact (John, 1982), or the sense that a close relationship is lacking or that one does not belong to a group (Galanki & Vassilopoulou, 2007). Loneliness can also emerge when relationships end (Peplau & Perlman, 1979), when an adolescent

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moves to a new town or school (Perlman & Peplau, 1981), or when other life changes occur (Young, 1982). Loneliness can be divided into two different types: *emotional loneliness* and *social loneliness* (Weiss, 1987). *Emotional loneliness* can be defined as feelings of emptiness triggered by shortcomings in forming close interpersonal relationships with family or friends (Weiss, 1987). *Social loneliness* can be defined as not being capable of becoming affiliated with a group with whom one shares common interests and activities (Weiss, 1987).

Studies have found that loneliness most frequently may occur during the life period known as adolescence (Hawthorne, 2008; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Feelings of loneliness can also arise when an adolescent begins a life stage that includes development; this change can result in a sense of becoming alienated from oneself (Nyström, 2014). However, adolescents' voluntary loneliness or solitude can indicate that they are seeking to differentiate themselves from others to find their unique self (Nyström, 2014). Adolescents' identity development is often related to different struggles such as self-doubt, social withdrawal, loneliness, poor self-esteem and depression (Lewinsohn et al., 1998). For some adolescents, feeling anxious or lonely around peers is normative and temporary, but for others those feelings can become chronic and consequently an obstacle to essential development. Researchers have found that adolescents who experience a high level of loneliness often display depressive symptoms and thoughts of suicide (Lasgaard et al., 2011; Vanhalst et al., 2012). For people who feel lonely it may be more difficult to find solutions to their interpersonal problems than for people who do not have those feelings; loneliness might, therefore, negatively affect self-esteem (Horowitz et al., 1982), which in turn is connected to personal well-being (Hewitt, 2009). Lyubomirsky et al. (2006) have found that happiness (a positive affect) and self-esteem (as the overall evaluation of self-worth) are fundamental indicators of positive emotional well-being. Self-esteem, a person's overall evaluation of a sense of worth, is linked to feelings of being competent or worthy alongside other emotions such as pride, triumph, despair and shame (Hewitt, 2009). Self-esteem can therefore be defined as confidence in oneself and satisfaction with who one is; self-respect, the appraisal or assessment of a person's own self-worth, arises from self-esteem (Saha et al., 2013). Low self-esteem and other various emotional intelligence skills (intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills and general mood subscales) are associated with loneliness (Yilmaz et al., 2013). Researchers have found that individuals with higher self-esteem also have more self-confidence, which results in them being able to more easily understand their own problems and emotions, accept themselves and others, and view drawbacks/failings as opportunities for overcoming obstacles and solving problems (Humphreys, 1998; Tufan & Yildiz, 1993). People with poor social support are more likely to experience loneliness and have low self-esteem, which can lead to low life satisfaction (Kong & You, 2013).

Generally speaking, loneliness can lead to serious, negative mental or physical health conditions, such as depression, suicidal thoughts, aggression, obesity and heart disease (Cacioppo et al., 2015). Health conditions associated with loneliness include overall poor physical health (Harris et al., 2013; Qualter et al., 2013), anxiety and depressive signs (Schinka et al., 2012, 2013; Qualter et al., 2010; Qualter et al., 2013; Vanhalst et al., 2012). Adolescents who experience long-term loneliness frequently develop highly depressive symptoms (Ladd & Ettekal, 2013). Loneliness and social isolation can even be generally linked to an increased risk of early mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Loneliness in adolescents are primarily linked to various physical (Cacioppo et al., 2015) and mental health problems (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). To date, there is no clear evidence on gender differences with regard to adolescent loneliness (Mahon et al., 2006; Van Roekel et al., 2010).

People who neither have strong nor large social networks may engage in withdrawal because of their experienced loneliness (Renshaw & Brown, 1993) even as early as kindergarten (Ladd et al., 1996). Researchers have seen that people who experience loneliness are in a state of mind that prevents them from connecting with others, even though they often wish for human contact and relationships (L. Peplau & Perlman, 1982; De Jong, 1987). Because loneliness is related to reservedness and shyness, individuals suffering from loneliness might also have low social skills (Yilmaz et al., 2013). Loneliness also can be to the result of inadequate relationships or personally unsatisfying

social experiences, which can lead individuals to isolate themselves from society, thus causing loneliness (Yilmaz et al., 2013). Adolescents tend to take a negative view of their social surroundings, relationships and their role in social relationships. Such a point of view can result in a negative bias towards adolescents and their social skills (Van Roekel et al., 2014), which can in turn lead some adolescents to become even more withdrawn. The loneliest children are those who have no mutual friends (Kingery & Erdley, 2007; Parker & Asher, 1993).

Recently, research indicates that loneliness can be a positive resource with regard to developing a teenager's personality, however (Praizendorf et al., 2020). Solitude has been identified as being connected to the development, knowledge and reflection of self (cf. Tammela, 2005). Consequently, loneliness is not solely associated with negative experiences (Söderberg et al., 2008). Some researchers perceive the human being to be basically inevitably lonely (Mijuscovic, 1979), while others maintain that human beings must realize their absolute difference from others and separate existence (Nyström, 2014). As Powys writes in 'A Philosophy of Solitude' (Powys, 1933, p. 37): *'Every human being is alone in the core of the mind. When we are born we cry; and that cry is the cry of loneliness. Thus it is with children. Thus it is with the growing youth'*. Powys (1933) also perceived that it is only in solitude that a person can come to know true happiness, for which silence is needed. Powys (1933) claimed that the art of life facilitates the formation of an original and unique self; we therefore need to cultivate loneliness within ourselves in order to be able to take the leap out to the other and into communion.

According to Baloyannis (2015), a person can long for solitude during certain life stages and even strive for loneliness with the desire to progress to self-concentration, self-control, self-evaluation, inner peace and serenity in the search for a deeper self-knowledge. Baloyannis has also found that solitude can be an opportunity for spiritual elevation, self-knowledge, inner peace, serenity and happiness, and that adolescents more often isolate themselves in order to regain emotional stability following strong emotional fluctuations, contradictions or despair (Baloyannis, 2015). For Nyström (2014), loneliness can be the true lifeform for adolescents, which may equip them for going out into the world. Adolescents explore their inner world to be able to meet the outer world, and it is in loneliness that they discover their inner complex world and may trace their purpose and meaning in life. Therefore, according to Nyström (2014), loneliness becomes an inner source for an adolescent and paves the way into communion/fellowship with others.

As earlier research proposes, both negative loneliness and positive loneliness affect adolescents' health; the former promotes health and the latter causes suffering and ill-health. In order to understand how to prevent ill-health and enhance health we need to understand both sides from the perspective of adolescents' lived experiences.

## Current study

The study aim was to explore how adolescents experience and describe the negative and positive sides of loneliness.

## Method

### Setting, sampling and recruitment

Fifteen interviews were conducted with Swedish-speaking Finns between 17 and 30 (in the southern and west coast-parts of Finland). We recruited participants in collaboration with a Finnish university and sent out information letters to all students via flyer by email, the university's student union information sheet, and social media. The choice of participants constituted self-selection as students who wished to participate were asked to contact the researchers by phone or email. Some participants were also reached through the snowball effect. A number of the adolescents spoke about loneliness-related problems from the past, such as mental issues, anxiety, depression, panic disorders, obsessions, exhaustion, eating disorders, self-harm, childhood traumas.

## Data collection and data analysis

This study was part of a larger project on loneliness and adolescents. This study concentrates on both the positive and negative sides of loneliness. Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted by the first researcher. The adolescents were, for instance, asked to tell about experiences and feelings of loneliness and various forms of loneliness as well as its possible causes, and to give a more detailed account of a particular incidence of involuntary loneliness and to focus on what they did at the time and their thoughts on it. What their thoughts and actions were following upon this situation. The interviews were conducted via live software programs or by phone. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes each and were recorded and transcribed word for word.

The study used a hermeneutical approach according to Gadamer (2004). The data analysis was inspired by content analysis according to Graneheim and Lundman (2004). With the aim of uncovering meaning in the texts in the form of meaning units, the data were read and analysed several times. The meaning units were then condensed, coded and divided into main themes and subthemes conveying the meaning of the data, and discussed by all researchers to reach general agreement. In a spirit of hermeneutics the researchers approached, read and analysed the data material with an openness and with a spirit of considerate vigilance. In order to elicit the substance close reading was used. During the reading of the data material, the researchers' preunderstanding was challenged and therefore the preunderstanding and the substance of the data material have been gently invited to the scientific dialogue. The horizon of the preunderstanding and the substance of the data material have subsequently been reflected against the whole. In a spirit of hermeneutics, the interpretation has constituted a movement back and forth between the whole-parts-whole and between interpretation and understanding. For an example of the data analysis, see Table 1.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by an ethical committee at the university where the study was conducted. The study followed the ethical guidelines outlined by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics, 2012) and the respondents

Table 1. An example of the data analysis.

Meaning unit	Condensed meaning unit	Code	Category	Main theme
... it's frightening to be alone too. ... the worse you feel the more you isolate yourself ... ... it [loneliness] feels very empty ... in some way ... It almost feels like I'm in another world than other people. That I see them, but they don't see me. And I get very torn [by being invisible to others].	... it's frightening to be alone too. it [loneliness] feels very empty ... I see them, but they don't see me. I get very torn [by being invisible to others]	to feel fear to feel empty to be invisible to feel anxious or troubled	<i>Emptiness, anxiety, fear and invisibility</i>	Negative experiences of involuntary loneliness
Well, most of the time I feel ... much stronger and often when you are alone it gives you more time for reflection. Inside. So I think that always when I have done some things such as ... well bigger things such as travelling or something like that by myself I have come out of it much stronger and have an understanding of what I want to do in the future or what kind of person I want to be and so on.	I feel much stronger when you are alone it gives you more time for reflection an understanding of what I want to do in the future or what kind of person I want to be	to gain strength or recharge to reflect, reflection deeper understanding of self	<i>Reflection, recharging and personal growth</i>	Positive experiences from self-chosen solitude

offered their informed consent. If unpleasant feelings aroused amongst the participants during the interviews, the interviewer lingered and discussed through these feelings to avoid leaving them with unpleasant feelings or distress. The participants could contact the interviewer later on if they needed help to cope with unpleasant feelings.

## Findings

The aim of this study was to explore how adolescents experience and describe negative and positive sides of loneliness. Two main themes were found: 'Negative experiences of involuntary loneliness' and 'Positive experiences from self-chosen solitude'. These main themes were followed by subthemes (seven), that are described in the following. For an overview of the findings, please see [Table 2](#).

### Negative experiences of involuntary loneliness

This main theme deals with adolescents' negative experiences of involuntary loneliness. When loneliness is involuntarily and unwanted it gives rise to several negative experiences, which are described in the following subthemes. Some of these feelings or emotions are *closely related to one another or somewhat intertwined*, and, therefore, some of these feelings or emotions are mentioned in two or more subthemes.

#### *Stress and a paralysing feeling as well as other physical symptoms*

Being alone without having chosen it, that is, involuntary solitude, takes energy, but, as the participants mention, so does being in a social situation when one would rather be and needs to be alone. Participants note that they can tell if they suffer from loneliness, for instance, by noticing if they wish that the day should end faster and they constantly look at the clock, thinking time passes too slowly. Time becomes a negative experience in involuntary solitude. On the other hand, one participant mentions that although feeling stressed and wound up one can experience an almost paralysing feeling where one cannot bring oneself to do anything. This is what one participant says: '*it was this kind of ... paralysing loneliness where you couldn't do anything even if you tried ...*' (P15). One participant describes this paradoxical and simultaneous sense of stress and the inability to act to which solitude may give rise: '*Yes, you feel stressed within but unable to act so that you ... should do something about it, but don't know what to do and you don't know how to do it.*' (P6) Another participant indicates that she experiences this inability to act as a form of weight that creates meaninglessness:

... you kind of feel a sudden weight, or sudden ... cold ... [as a result of feeling lonely] ... many times I have been completely unable to act ... I have just stayed in bed all day. ... thinking 'no, there's no point in doing anything and if I decide to do anything I just wait until someone comes home' and till then everything is just like in a ... vacuum ... you just exist [but don't feel anything]. ... And then at this stage I don't stay in touch with anyone because then it becomes like ... it feels meaningless, they have other things to do [she thinks]. (P13)

Another participant describes it differently as being stressed by the clock ticking away and that time just passes and the days go by without getting anything done: '*... time went by too quickly for me. ...*

**Table 2.** Study finding.

Main theme	Subtheme
Negative experiences of involuntary loneliness	<i>Stressful and paralysing feeling and other physical symptoms</i> <i>Emptiness, anxiety, fear and invisibility</i> <i>Shame, self-blame and self-contempt</i> <i>Meaninglessness, hopelessness and exclusion</i>
Positive experiences from self-chosen solitude	<i>Freedom, calmness and recovery</i> <i>Creativity and meaningfulness</i> <i>Reflection, recharging and personal growth</i>

*time became my enemy because I felt that I missed more and more time and I panicked because of it ... and I couldn't do anything.'* (P9) One participant relates that the stress of being lonely feels irritating and frustrating and she even experiences physical symptoms and stiffness as a result of loneliness and isolation: *"... I have physical problems all the time because of this ... heavy stuff that you're going through psychologically ... I have felt like I have even had problems with moving around because I am so 'stuck in my own head', and in my home.* (P10)

### **Emptiness, anxiety, fear and invisibility**

The participants described involuntary loneliness as an emptiness as well as anxiety and fear. They also described a sense of being invisible to others. Much fear is connected with loneliness; as one participant says: *'... it's frightening to be alone too. ... the worse you feel the more you isolate yourself ...'* (P12) Many might try hard to fit into social groups and, for example, spend time watching TV series that they do not enjoy, only to be able to talk about them with others in school with their peers and thereby become socially accepted, popular and seem interesting. This is how one participant describes loneliness: *"Hmm ... it [loneliness] feels very empty ... in some way ... It almost feels like I'm in another world than other people. That I see them, but they don't see me. And I get very torn [by being invisible to others]."* (P1) Another participant indicates that it is common to feel invisible in school despite belonging to various groups: *'... school is the best example of this [feeling invisible in a group]. It can happen that one does not fit in one's study group ... when seeing that everyone else find their groups and friends and have fun ... And seeing that they enjoy their groups, one feels extra lonely then.'* (P2) Another describes the anxiety-ridden and restless feeling to which loneliness gives rise. The longer time one spends alone, the more difficult it is to be social again, she indicates, which in turn makes it more difficult to deal with it. This is how she describes loneliness:

How does loneliness feel? It's an empty feeling ... and a very anxiety-ridden feeling ... it's like I feel incredibly restless and at the same time tired ... which is a strange combination. And a sense of meaninglessness. that's maybe the strongest feeling. It's a very difficult feeling because you don't feel like doing anything. And even if it would be possible to be with someone it feels kind of difficult to be social after a long period of loneliness. (P2)

Another participant describes fear as one of the main features of loneliness:

It was probably fear [which was difficult in loneliness] and I felt like a failure ... It felt like I was never enough or fitted into a group. The fear is there but I believe it's more of a biological effect in us. For it was simply dangerous for us [humans] to be alone ... At least I have experienced shame stronger than fear. Fear has perhaps created physiological changes, being in fight or flight and such ... but what feels bad is shame ... (P1)

Several of the participants testify to that in connection with depressions or other mental problems anxiety-ridden thoughts are experienced deeper and as more difficult, and how they feel imprisoned by them. Many adolescents experience self-destruction and feel they need support from others. One participant describes how the lack of consolation from parents when she needed it the most in her early youth created feelings of loneliness and fear during a period when she was feeling poorly:

... there have been times when I have suffered from panic attacks and my parents just ignored it or reacted with anger ... then I felt lonely and like I can't handle anything and it felt like ... everything around me just disappears. It felt like a lot of darkness ... and I felt afraid ... and unsafe. (P3)

### **Shame, self-blame and self-contempt**

Loneliness occurs when a person does not have contact with others or when there is no one to listen to what the person has to say. Several participants mentioned that shame is the most negative feeling in loneliness. Eventually fear of being left out of communion, when the individual is excluded, is said to be the most hurtful feeling; this causes the person to feel shame. This is how one participant describes this feeling:



Yes, I have some difficult moments, when I can still feel lonely. ... And I can feel ... alone with these problems. ... and that ... I'm just a difficult person who shouldn't be with someone. That I shouldn't disturb someone else. Sometimes I just feel worthless. ... and then I just want to have closeness ... (P3)

One participant says that it is sometimes beneficial to be alone with one's problems so as not to overburden others. Striking a balance is good so that one can sometimes learn to deal with one's own problems. She also indicates that it is not good to be alone with one's problems too long because that only makes it worse. As a result of feeling lonely both shame and self-accusations may occur as a double burden of suffering. Blame can be directed both inwardly and outwardly, as one participant relates:

You feel stress in a way and that ... 'why do I feel this way in this situation', and ... you are often hard on yourself and that 'no but you shouldn't feel this way'. ... and blame yourself for 'having put yourself in this situation' ... you feel guilty for feeling lonely ... and you feel ashamed for feeling lonely. (P7)

One participant relates that loneliness also leads to aggression directed towards other people: '*... I was perhaps more like blaming everyone else for my loneliness.*' (P11) Several participants mention that shame and self-contempt are the most difficult feelings that arise from loneliness. They mean that shame paralyzes and makes them feel worthless and stuck in their situation and that they therefore need to get rid of it or handle it in some way:

And it's an extreme shame for being alone. Shame makes me feel really bad. I mean ... humans are a social species ... yet nobody else in the group is with me so it feels like you ... I don't know ... it's like major self-contempt [one feels] like there's something wrong with me and I don't see it myself, but others see it. (P1)

Loneliness and shame make them reluctant to tell anyone, and they feel bad as human beings, not having succeeded in making friends can be experienced as shameful. This is what one participant says:

... and it's something that is very difficult to talk with others about ... confessing that you are so alone. Because you feel so pathetic ... And I believe the biggest problem here is ... that you feel shame. And then that you have not made any friends, what's wrong with me? And why do everyone else but me succeed? (P2)

Participants reveal that if having experienced loneliness earlier it is difficult to notice that the same feeling returns after all these years, because this apparently confirms that there must be something wrong with them and so self-accusations emerge. This is what one participant relates: '*But this shame has always been very tangible ... the shame for being lonely. ... it's in some way connected with being weak and with being something wrong with you so that ... you should blame yourself for being alone.*' (P6) One participant specifies that now when she is older she has realized that not everything has to do with self when experiencing loneliness. Another experiences loneliness as immaturity but which she is incapable of changing although she wants to.

### ***Meaninglessness, hopelessness and exclusion***

This subtheme describes meaninglessness, hopelessness and exclusion as negative experiences of involuntary loneliness. Participants bear witness to often feeling meaninglessness and hopelessness in relation to loneliness if they have tried to do everything that is recommended for reducing loneliness but nothing has helped. Participants suggest that activities are meaningless if they are not right for you and if you perform them only as a means of finding social contacts. Reading books or exercising does not help if there is longing for human contact. She explains it in this way: '*And even if you already do all of those things ... everything they recommend ... but nothing helps, and you still feel lonely because being with books and going for walks are not social activities.*' (P2) One participant suggests that meaninglessness is not as dramatic as hopelessness, but that meaninglessness feels like everything loses its meaning:

Meaninglessness can also be like boring, and dull ... like "this doesn't mean anything anymore". ... I think I have felt such meaninglessness for some time now ... I'm so ... bored by this ... being alone, but I don't get to be with other people and I would like to ... begin to practice. (P10)

One participant proposes the daily performance of small things as a first step in trying to reduce meaninglessness and by that a sense of loneliness:

I had this ... that you must try to do something all the time, I thought. It was ... like first aid in a way. That ... I had to get something done ... I set my expectations very low ... 'If I cook something that is worth eating today I have actually done something' ... you tried to make the days pass doing small things to pass the time ... (P15)

The participants suggest that as adolescents they can feel a deep loneliness when they are forced to be away from their friends: '*... it was when I was really ill. And I ... when my friends started partying in upper secondary school and ... I wanted to get to know new friends and to be "the life of the party" like I used to be, but I couldn't. ... but I was forced to sit at home in my room ... so I felt very lonely at the time.*' (P8) One participant tells about moments when she had not been able to adjust to new situations and changes and as a result of social anxiety was not able to cope with the stress of participating in an event and how she felt very lonely and dejected, excluded from the communion and also felt like a failure: '*I had registered for an event one day but couldn't handle going there and so I felt so lonely and as an outsider and just started to cry. And I felt ... lost. It's difficult for me sometimes with new situations and changes.*' (P3) Hopelessness is one of the strongest feelings in experiencing a sense of loneliness, which can feel like life is not worth living. This is how one participant describes it: '*Well, when I really had these suicide thoughts then it was really hopeless, like I felt that no there is no hope and I don't want to live anymore ...*' (P10) Another participant says that the most difficult times of feeling lonely and excluded are holidays.

... New Year and Midsummer are ... [holidays] they're the worst for me, school breaks ups etc. Because these are what I call 'Have fun with your friends – If you have any' holidays ... I used to have the habit of, for instance, go to bed early and sleep New Year's Eve and so skip it. ... I have often contemplated suicide during these [holidays] because the contrasts are so clear – spending a holiday by yourself [as opposed to with friends]. (P1)

## Positive experiences from self-chosen solitude

This main theme deals with positive experiences from self-chosen solitude amongst adolescents. Participants mention that they often long for being alone. In other words, they feel positive about being alone when they themselves have chosen it. The various kinds of positive experiences from being alone are described more in detail below.

### Freedom, calmness and recovery

This subtheme concerned freedom, calmness and recovery as positive experiences from self-chosen solitude. Most of the participants express that they enjoy solitude when they themselves have chosen it; they feel freedom and peace and quiet to recover from everyday impressions. After a longer period of social exchange ... they miss being by themselves, for instance, lying in bed a whole day watching TV-series. Self-chosen solitude is calming and balancing. It is important to have time alone because it offers an opportunity for rest and recuperation from too many social impressions: '*It is relaxing ... after intensively spending a long time with others it is nice to go home and just be and ... not having to talk to somebody ... or just focus on your own needs and desires ... [you get] a breathing space ...*' (P6) Participants indicate that solitude is needed for them to recharge their batteries: '*Yes, I notice that after a day or two I'm fully recharged so to speak. It's beneficial, I have to pause ... That's about the only way I can recharge, alone. When it's needed.*' (P10)

A recurrent feeling in self-chosen solitude described by the adolescents is a sense of calmness. The calmness and stillness in solitude offer the opportunity to be in one's head with one's own thoughts. A young girl expresses it in this way: '*... I like coming home early when nobody else is home and nobody can call on me and force me to do things. I want to be by myself, I want to decide for myself*

*and ... it's ... some kind of calmness with a sense of freedom ... a positive feeling."* (P8) Another participant who no longer lives with the parents describes freedom as follows:

Well, it is nice to know that it's OK this is my home and nobody can come here and disturb me, it's like this ... freedom, that I'm in control of my own life ... that here is peace and quiet ... safety ... that I can come here [to my] ... safe cave. (P10)

In loneliness, the adolescent can experience a sense of freedom and control. This is exemplified by one participant who relates how she usually takes kayak trips and paddle out into the water alone: *"and ... as soon as I had decided to go kayaking for the whole day and just be by myself ... and this particular time it was a beautiful day and I relaxed ... perhaps it's this kind of combination of freedom and being able to do what I want ..."* (P6)

### **Creativity and meaningfulness**

This subtheme concerned creativity and meaningfulness as positive experiences from self-chosen solitude. One positive side to spending time alone is that it can be an outlet for creativity for adolescents, and the solitude offers them the opportunity to think. There is time for what they want to do by themselves. One participant expresses it as follows: *'I do so many things I feel passionate about. Games, music, and ... So there is something positive to this as well.'* (P9) Another participant says this: *I have so many hobbies that I do alone, such as when I create music and things like the time I spend with myself is super important, it is instructive ... "* (P12) Another participant describes it like this:

... there are moments for example, when I just want to sit by my computer and write. ... Or moments when I just want to sit down at the piano and play, or read books, just be. So I enjoy it ... my first year as a student I wrote a lot ... at the time it may have been what I wanted to do most, because to sit down and write is very selfish. I mean you just close the door and are happy to just escape from everyone. (P2)

The participants emphasize that it is beneficial and gives them positive energy to spend time alone when doing something meaningful or when engaged in a small project. One participant says: *'... when I have a project that I can focus on by myself this gives me energy. But if I don't have a project or I don't know what to do or I don't have any ideas then it quickly becomes like this ... uncomfortable loneliness.'* (P2)

To do something practical can be therapeutic and reduce a sense of loneliness. One participant says that when one has something meaningful to do or look forward to the experience of loneliness is lessened:

I can think that 'now I'm going to clean the kitchen and make a delicious dinner till he comes home, just think how happy he will be ... ' And then the loneliness is no longer a problem but I have a task to perform, and then I can feel calm in my loneliness because I know I have something to do at one point and then ... that it has a lot to do with having something to look forward to. (P13)

### **Reflection, recharging and personal growth**

This subtheme describes reflection, recharging and personal growth as positive experiences from self-chosen solitude. Time alone is seen as positive because it offers adolescents the opportunity to reflect and provides them with another kind of energy than that received when being with other people: *'... it feels so good if I have time to be alone sometimes and that I can collect myself and just sit there and you know think and ... reflect a little and you know ... yes, reset myself.'* (P13) Another says: *'I am very ... introspective ... and self-reflecting and ... and I love quietness ... '* (P9) One participant describes how she needs to be alone to be able to think about things that have happened during the day, and earlier, and she usually reflects on and assesses what she is and has been like and above all who she wants to be as a person. In other words, this has to do with reflection as a means to achieve a higher level of personal growth:

When I am alone ... I think about things ... what I am like as a person ... the bad things I have done ... before when ... and the good things I have done ... that I have had time to consider what I have done ... and which today I think I should not be doing anymore ... (P4)

The participants indicate that it is also crucial for their romantic relationships that they spend some time alone so as not to affect the relation negatively and to avoid miscommunication about not having sufficient time alone. This is what one participant says: *'Well, I feel [that alone-time is needed] . . . to have the energy to be social again. You recharge in some way [in self-chosen solitude].'* (P7) Participants also bear witness to that recuperation is needed after a long period of social meetings:

Well I also need a lot of time . . . to recover if I have spent time with a lot of people. More of a balance, because then it becomes so much when I am just at home by myself and that is difficult. And it becomes like 'why don't I have a partner, and why don't I have that and' . . . (P10)

One participant who has a family, works and studies relates how nice it can be to spend time alone:

And when you are really alone you have time to think about things . . . and be alone with your thoughts as well . . . and it can be everything under the sun . . . what groceries I have to buy next week . . . and much bigger things as well such as about life . . . (P11)

Being alone is important for adolescents' personal growth towards becoming independent individuals and adults. When being alone adolescents can become stronger and learn to know themselves better. Loneliness can offer adolescents the vital pause to recharge their batteries:

Well, most of the time I feel . . . much stronger and often when you are alone it gives you more time for reflection. Inside. So I think that always when I have done some things such as . . . well bigger things such as traveling or something like that by myself I have come out of it much stronger and have an understanding of what I want to do in the future or what kind of person I want to be and so on. (P6)

## Discussion

We have sought to explore how adolescents describe and experience the negative and positive sides of loneliness. This study shows that they can experience both negative and positive experiences of loneliness: it can be a source for renewed strength, even though simultaneously, on another level, also can be something painful that drains the adolescent and causes suffering. In the two main themes negative experiences emerged due to involuntary loneliness and positive experiences as a result of voluntary solitude. Nearly every participant described how loneliness can be felt as burdensome and negative, but that there can also be positive sides to it. Many participants enjoy being alone but know that if they spend too much time on their own it becomes difficult. Tornstam et al. (2010) similarly describe that loneliness can be both self-chosen and thus positive and negative, were loneliness instead is marked by feelings such as self-deprecation, self-pity and desperation.

We found that involuntary loneliness can cause stress (cf. Strang, 2014) and give rise to paralysing feelings as well as other symptoms. Peplau and Perlman (L. Peplau & Perlman, 1982) and also De Jong (1987) have found that persons experiencing loneliness are in a state of mind where they are prevented from making contact with others. Van Roekel et al. (2014) also suggest that negative prejudices towards their own social skills can lead to withdrawal from social contacts. In this aspect we want to highlight that strengthening adolescents' self-esteem can act as a buffer to experiencing negative loneliness (cf. Humphreys, 1998; Tufan & Yildiz, 1993). Loneliness has also been found to correlate with *an external locus of control* (Moore & Schultz, 1983). This means that young people who view themselves as passively affected by things outside their control more likely experience involuntary loneliness. Involuntary loneliness can also be understood through the concept of *learned helplessness*. When people experience a lack of control in an adverse situation they become passive and this passivity remains even as the situation changes (Maier & Seligman, 1976). Earlier experiences of social exclusion and involuntary loneliness that lead to learned helplessness can be countered through cognitive interventions that challenge the negative perceptions that uphold the feelings of helplessness (Seligman et al., 1995). Previous research has also shown that loneliness has consequences for physical health in the sense that the lack of a sense of connection to other people often causes difficult stress (Segrin et al., 2018). Segrin and Passalacqua (2010) also state that loneliness

affects health negatively due to the self-experienced stress that often occurs with loneliness. As earlier mentioned, Strang (2014) reminds us that the rapid development of society has led to a decrease in dependence on the group and towards individuality, and that we rarely meet other people due to digitalization. The genes have, however, not adapted to this rapid change, meaning that human beings' original bodily and mental reactions are still unchanged. Loneliness and exclusion, therefore, still create stress, anxiety and discomfort.

Another finding in this study was that involuntary loneliness can lead to feelings of emptiness, anxiety and invisibility. This is in line with earlier research that has found loneliness to be connected to emptiness and sadness (L. Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Weeks & Asher, 2012). Previous studies have also identified a connection between loneliness and anxiety as well as depression (Lasgaard et al., 2011; Rönkä et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2005). Stickley et al. (2016) describe that adolescents who experience loneliness also suffer from anxiety and other somatic problems such as headaches and depressive symptoms. The finding regarding invisibility in this study as an experience that comes with the feeling of loneliness in adolescence is in line with Junttila (2018) who has shown that individuals who experience loneliness can feel that they do not fit in, are not on the same page as others, and can also feel they are invisible. Vaarala et al. (2013) have also revealed that adolescents can experience themselves as invisible when they suffer from loneliness, but that they nevertheless can become targets for bullying in the classroom, even by their teachers.

We also found that involuntary loneliness can lead to feelings of shame, self-blame and self-contempt. Junttila (2018), too, underlines that the loneliness that emerges when being surrounded by other people but not being able to connect with them constitutes a much more severe type of loneliness. This type of loneliness awakens shame within a person which in turn gives rise to feelings of being a failure, and so leads to further withdrawal and a sense of being strange in the eyes of others someone that nobody wants to have contact with (Junttila, 2018). Lonely students often feel depressed, angry, afraid or misunderstood, and they become highly critical of themselves, overly sensitive or harbours self-pity, and may even be critical of and thus blame others for their own situation (Booth et al., 1992). Self-esteem has also been connected to loneliness in earlier research (Yilmaz et al., 2013). Orth et al. (2008) have shown that depressive symptoms and loneliness are also related to an increased processing of negative self-relevant information which might decrease self-esteem. Mann et al. (2004) indicate that self-esteem affects cognitive evaluations of stress and the selection of coping strategies. High self-esteem might, therefore, prevent loneliness and depressive symptoms, since effective coping strategies can be chosen and thus cognitively diminish the impact of stress.

Another finding in this study was that involuntary loneliness can also lead to feelings of meaninglessness, hopelessness and exclusion or outsidership. Splithoven, Lodder, Goossens, Bijttebier, Bastin, Verhagen and Scholte (Splithoven et al., 2017) have also found loneliness and depressive symptoms occurring both in parallel and independently in people. Earlier studies have identified that loneliness is related to feelings of isolation and low satisfaction with life (Goodwin et al., 2001; Mellor et al., 2008; Myllyniemi, 2015; Shevlin et al., 2014; Tuzgöl Dost, 2007). Previous research has also shown that social exclusion has a connection with loneliness amongst adolescents, and that it also can be a contributing reason for loneliness later in life (Rönkä et al., 2018). Having satisfying social contacts and being happy increases the experience of positive events which lowers the risk of experiencing loneliness and depressive symptoms (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006). This finding correlates with Baran et al. (2015) who have revealed that a student with high levels of loneliness also has high levels of hopelessness. Thus, we want to underline the importance of enhancing adolescents' social support in order to decrease and alleviate loneliness in this group (cf. Kong & You, 2013).

We found that adolescents' voluntary solitude can lead to positive experiences, such as freedom, calmness, recovery, creativity and meaningfulness. Baloyannis (2015) has also found that chosen solitude can be a positive and constructive experience. We found that self-

chosen solitude can lead to positive experiences of reflection, recharging and personal growth. Our findings are in line with those of Baloyannis (2015), who found that when adolescents seek self-identification solitude can be a 'driving' force which stimulates or fuels an inner dialogue and quest for values and motivations that can enhance a deeper understanding of the meaning of life and result in a well-balanced personality. Further, Praizendorf et al. (2020) have also found that loneliness can act as a positive resource for developing the personality of an adolescent.

A strength of this study is that the first author who conducted the interviews is an experienced qualitative researcher familiar with interview techniques.

## Conclusion

We have seen that adolescents experience both voluntary and involuntary loneliness. Regarding negative experiences of loneliness, paralysing feelings and anxiety as well as emptiness, shame and meaninglessness were particularly prominent. Regarding positive experiences of loneliness, freedom, calmness, creativity and recharging as well as personal growth were particularly prominent. We found that an adolescent can simultaneously experience loneliness as being both positive and negative. Consequently, even if adolescents suffer from the negative experiences of loneliness, they can still use its positive aspects as a source for reaching balance and harmony in life and renewed strength. This new understanding is something that professionals working with adolescents can use when coaching them so as to enhance their mental health and well-being. Future studies should focus on aspects that can alleviate adolescents' negative experiences of loneliness, as seen from adolescents' experiences and points of view.

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## Disclosure statement

The author state that there are no sources of conflicts.

## Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the study was granted by an ethical committee at the university where the researchers were situated. The study followed the ethical guidelines outlined by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics, 2012) and the respondents offered their informed consent.

## Author contributions

Jessica Hemberg contributed to study conception, data collection, design, data analysis, discussion and drafted the manuscript. Yulia Korzhina, Henrik Groundstroem, Lillemor Östman, Lisbet Nyström and Pia Nyman-Kurkiala contributed to the data analysis, discussion and provided critical reflections.

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