

## Schedule “Loneliness as a Social Phenomenon: Cross-Cultural Approaches to a Human Condition”

Venue: [Xplanatorium Herrenhausen](#)

Herrenhäuser Str. 5, 30419 Hannover

### Wednesday, June 11

09:30 – 13:00	Volkswagen Foundation: Joint Program and Lunch
13:00-13:15	<b>Introduction: Differentiating Loneliness and Social Isolation – Interdisciplinary Approaches</b> Aaron Hames, Sachiko Horiguchi, Carolin Fleischer-Heininger, Celia Spoden
13:15 – 14:45	<b>First Session: Conceptual Perspectives on Loneliness</b> <b>Chair: Wolfram Manzenreiter</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Chikako Ozawa-de Silva “The Anatomy of Loneliness and the Phenomenon of a Lonely Society”</li><li>2. Zohar Lederman “Ethics of Loneliness”</li><li>3. Carolin Fleischer-Heininger “Encountering Loneliness in Contemporary Japanese Literature”</li></ol>
14:45 – 15:15	Coffee Break

15:15 – 16:45	<p><b>Second Session: Technological Solutions to Loneliness and Social Isolation</b></p> <p><b>Chair: Felix Spremberg</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Daniel White &amp; Hirofumi Katsuno (presenter) “Modelling Loneliness in Japan: Companion Robot Experiments in Artificial Emotional Intelligence”</li> <li>2. Marit Haldar &amp; Maja Nordtug “Tackling Loneliness Amongst Older People and Homebound Students with Telepresence Technology in Norway”</li> <li>3. Celia Spoden “Avatar Robots as a Solution to Loneliness? Technological Approaches to Overcome Social Isolation from Japan and Germany”</li> </ol>
16:45 – 17:00	Coffee Break
17:00 – 19:00	<p><b>Third Session: Loneliness and Social Isolation in Old Age</b></p> <p><b>Chair: Felix Spremberg</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Heesun Shin and Chihyung Jeon “‘Grandma, Hug Me Tight’: Living with a ‘Robot Grandchild’ in South Korea”</li> <li>2. Aaron Hames “The Virtues of Analog: Social Life for Older People in Japan”</li> <li>3. Iza Kavedžija “The Spectre of Loneliness: Communities of care and engaged aging in Japan”</li> </ol>
19:00	Dinner

Thursday, June 12	
08:30 – 10:00	<p><b>Fourth Session: Perspectives on Loneliness and Social Isolation from Disability Studies, Psychosocial and Healthcare</b></p> <p><b>Chair: Evelyn Schulz</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Jan Steffens and Thomas Hoffmann “Isolation, Social Development and Disability: A Cultural-historical Approach”</li> <li>2. Sachiko Horiguchi “How Social Workers in Japan, Germany, UK and Sweden Have Been Tackling Social Isolation: Exploring the Relationships Between the Experiences of Social Isolation and Welfare Policies”</li> <li>3. Sebastian Hofstetter “Digital Health Literacy for Burnout and Workplace-Related Social Isolation in Japan: Evaluating Online Resources Using MAPPinfo”</li> </ol>
10:00 – 10:30	Coffee Break
10:30 – 12:00	<p><b>Fifth Session: Bridging Scholarship and Practice – Addressing Loneliness and Social Isolation from a Practitioners Perspectives</b></p> <p>Workshop by Birgit Redlich on “TOGETHER Against the RIGHT. Experiences of Loneliness as a Catalyst for Democratic Distance and Authoritarian Attitudes at Vocational Schools in Germany?”, a project to empower young people from diverse educational or migrational backgrounds in structurally weak areas, who experienced discrimination and loneliness during the coronavirus pandemic. The project is funded as part of the program “Demokratie leben!” by the BMFSFJ, in cooperation between the Adam von Trott Foundation and the Chair of Sociology of Rural Areas at Georg-August-University Göttingen.</p>
12:00 – 13:00	Volkswagen Foundation: Joint Lunch

13:00 – 16:00	<p><b>Field Trip “Growing Older in the Midst of it All – Active On-Site”, Arbeiterwohlfahrt Hannover e.V. List Nord Ost and Anderten</b></p> <p>Introduction by Silke Oppenhausen and Stepanie Böhm from the welfare association Arbeiterwohlfahrt Hannover e.V. to „Mittendrin älter werden – aktiv vor Ort“ / “Growing Older in the Midst of it All – Active On-Site”, a project addressing loneliness amongst older adults threatened or affected by loneliness. The project is funded under the BMFSFJ-program “Strengthening the Participation of Older People – Against Loneliness and Social Isolation” and the European Social Fund Plus</p>
After 16:00	<p><b>Volkswagen Foundation: Joint Activity and Dinner</b></p> <p><b>16:00-17:00 Panel discussion</b></p> <p><b>17:00-18:00 Poster Exhibition</b></p> <p><b>18:00-19:00 Dinner</b></p> <p><b>19:00-20:30 Film Screening</b> “Hug Me Tight: A Robot Story”, produced by Heesun Shin and Chihyung Jeon with support from the National Research Foundation of South Korea</p> <p>Introduction by Heesun Shin and Chihyung Jeon</p>

<b>Friday, June 13</b>	
09:00 – 09:30	Comments by Chairs (10 minutes each)
09:30 – 10:30	<p>Working Groups: How Can Societies Become More Inclusive and Reduce Loneliness and Social Isolation?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Identifying social structures that lead to exclusion, social isolation, and feelings of loneliness; how to build inclusive social structures that foster meaningful connections, mutual social support, and a sense of belonging;</li> <li>2) Loneliness and social isolation in different age groups and specific challenges;</li> <li>3) The roles of science, technology, civil society, and politics, and their connections in addressing social isolation and loneliness</li> </ol>
10:30 – 12:00	Roundtable Discussion: Further Cooperation and Dissemination of Results
12:00 – 14:00	Volkswagen Foundation: Joint Closing Remarks, Panel Discussion, and Lunch

**Volkswagen Foundation Thematic Week “Tackling Loneliness” Juni 11-13, 2025 – Four Parallel Symposia**

1. Tackling Loneliness among young People in Africa, Prof. Dr. Shuyan Liu, Charité Universitätsmedizin Berlin
2. Loneliness as a Social Phenomenon: Cross-cultural Approaches to a Human Condition, Dr. Celia Spoden & Dr. Carolin Fleischer-Heininger DIJ, Sachiko Horiguchi (Temple University, Japan Campus), Aaron Hames (The Chinese University Hong Kong)
3. The next big Questions on Loneliness: Integrating National and International Perspectives on Research and Policy Priorities, Prof. Dr. Maike Luhmann, Universität Bochum
4. Loneliness in Democracy, Priv.-Doz. Dr. Janosch Schobin, Universität Kassel

## **Abstracts**

### **First Session: Conceptual Perspectives on Loneliness**

#### **“The Anatomy of Loneliness and the Phenomenon of a Lonely Society”**

**Chikako Ozawa-de Silva**

What is loneliness? It’s crucial to distinguish between social isolation (being physically apart) and perceived isolation (the subjective experience of loneliness). One can experience solitude without distress, or conversely, feel profoundly lonely even when surrounded by people.

Furthermore, loneliness is more than just a personal feeling. Recent research suggests it stems not primarily from an individual’s disposition, but from not being seen and valued by others. In this view, loneliness is less a symptom of individual ailment and more a consequence of a fractured society—one that actively produces loneliness through social structures that diminish compassion and kindness.

Recognized by global leaders and health institutions as a public health epidemic, loneliness is associated with rising rates of suicide, social anxiety, and violence. Its roots lie less in individuals themselves and more in societies that prioritize instrumental value (competition, productivity) over intrinsic value (care, self-worth). Loneliness, therefore, arises from a deficit of social connection, empathy, and the feeling of being cared for and understood.

I use the phrase “the lonely society,” which is intentionally paradoxical, to describe this. While society implies togetherness and social engagement—the antithesis of physical separation—it does not preclude the internal experience of isolation. This presentation will also discuss the social conditions that foster this “lonely society” that is based on my long-term ethnographic research in Japan.

#### **“The Ethics of Loneliness”**

**Zohar Lederman**

Is loneliness an ethical problem? By an “ethical problem” I mean: is it something that third-party individuals (who are not related) should be concerned and do something about? A related question is whether this is a public health problem, meaning—should public health agencies or governments do something about it?

These questions encapsulate, in essence, the ethics of loneliness. Surprisingly, while philosophers of mind, social scientists, neuroscientists, and public health experts have studied and highlighted loneliness as a significant concern for roughly six decades, the ethics of loneliness has largely been neglected as an area of philosophical inquiry. Often, it is either assumed that loneliness is a personal problem that requires personal efforts, or that it is a public health problem that requires systematic solutions, but no normative argument to support either assumption is provided. In this talk I will delineate the scope of, and motivation for a systematic, normative assessment of loneliness, describing challenges on the one hand along with opportunities on the other. I will argue that from an ethical perspective, the kinds of loneliness we should worry about are the kinds that negatively affect what we as a society and/or third-party individuals care about. These may be health, wellbeing, and capabilities.

### **“Encountering Loneliness in Contemporary Japanese Literature”**

**Carolyn Fleischer-Heininger**

Loneliness is an experience inherent to human lives, and in so being it is an abiding motif of literature. Since the Meiji era, in the literature of Japan this motif is most visible in interplay with dynamics of modernization and individualization. During the last 30 years it significantly gained topicality and impact. Depicting their characters subjective, mostly – but not entirely – negative experiences of feeling lonely in a world ever more disabling social connectedness, a vast number of literary works acknowledge loneliness as a new human condition. This results from fundamental social and technological transformations, experiences of crisis, sustained neoliberal policies, and not least social norms; and it has the most significant impact on vulnerable and marginalized groups.

In my paper I analyze the motif of loneliness in works of contemporary literature. I show that – besides prevalence – by portraying varied experiences of loneliness, these works enable readers to perceive, feel, and understand loneliness as a diverse and complex phenomenon that is shaped by historical, social and cultural contexts.

## **Second Session: Technological Solutions to Loneliness and Social Isolation**

### **“Modelling Loneliness in Japan: Companion Robot Experiments in Artificial Emotional Intelligence”**

**Daniel White and Hirofumi Katsuno**

Although solitude has long been a feature of Japan’s modernization processes, with both positive and negative connotations, in recent years, a concern with loneliness has captured the public imagination with alarm. Bordering on pathologization, loneliness is often understood as a consequence of economic stagnation and social estrangement, both from others and, in anthropologist Chikako Ozawa-de Silva’s assessment, from a society that promises belonging based on productivity. While sociologists in Japan seek society-based diagnoses, and psychologists seek therapeutic interventions on models of interpersonal relations, technologists are adopting another approach. Based on the premise that robots can also model forms of emotional comfort, robotics engineers propose that robots may be able to heal loneliness. In contrast to some sociological perspectives that treat loneliness as a uniform problem in Japan, developers of companion robots are treating robotic platforms with various forms of artificial emotional intelligence as diagnostic devices. In this paper we analyze companion robots as experimental devices that hold the potential to generate feedback on human-robot interaction through a robotic platform of data collection on loneliness that is both affective and digital. We propose that companion robots may serve as ethnographic diagnostic devices that hold the potential to challenge traditional, overly uniform, or exclusively psychological diagnoses of loneliness in Japan.

### **“Tackling Loneliness Amongst Older People and Homebound Students with Telepresence Technology in Norway”**

**Marit Haldar & Maja Nordtug**

In this presentation, we wish to explore the use of telepresence technologies to tackle loneliness in Norway. Specifically, we explore the use of the telepresence robot avatar AV1 to tackle loneliness amongst homebound students and the use of KOMP, a “simple and safe technology for photo sharing, text messaging and video calling for everyone” (Rasmussen, Askheim, Oppedal & Haldar, Marit 2021), to tackle loneliness amongst old people with low technological skills. The use of digital technology for social contact and for tackling loneliness depends on a variety of factors (Nordtug & Johannessen, 2023). In this presentation, we will explore under what circumstances these specific telepresence technologies can advantageously be used to tackle



loneliness, as well as the pitfalls related to the use. The findings are based on two large-scale projects in Norway exploring “virtual presence” and “the metaphysics of presence”, respectively – especially investigating the evolving relationship between technology and loneliness, considering how societal perceptions shaped technological solutions and vice versa.

### **“Avatar Robots for Hospitalized Children and People with Disabilities: Comparing Technological Approaches to Loneliness and Social Isolation from Japan and Germany”**

**Celia Spoden**

People who face difficulties leaving their home or hospital room due to mobility impairments, illness, a need to avoid infections or social anxiety are prone to social isolation and experiencing loneliness. Loneliness is associated with feelings of not contributing to society, feeling unneeded, or perceiving life as meaningless. In addition, people with disabilities often have fewer choices regarding work and planning their future. Over the last decade, avatar robots have been introduced at schools and workplaces to provide opportunities for social inclusion and to counteract isolation and feelings of loneliness. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, I will present the social practices in which the avatar robots OriHime in Japan and AV1 in Germany are embedded. Avatar robots are implemented in German and Japanese classrooms to connect students with prolonged childhood illnesses with their peers at school, enabling social and educational participation and easing their return to school. In Germany, AV1 is restricted to temporary use for students undergoing cancer treatment or with chronic fatigue syndrome. In Japan, however, OriHime is also used to help children with physical, mental, and developmental disabilities. Furthermore, the Japanese developer Ory Laboratory has opened a café where adults who face difficulties leaving their homes for various reasons can work remotely and serve customers via OriHime. In cooperation with special needs schools, Ory Lab also established an internship program, where experienced OriHime pilots teach children with disabilities how to serve customers and act as their mentors. By presenting my interlocutor’s perceptions of social participation, work, and disability, I demonstrate how avatar robots open up new opportunities for meaningful interactions, foster feelings of independence and belonging, and help adopt a positive attitude toward the future. However, I also show that these experiences are highly contingent upon how avatar robots are integrated into social practices.

## **Third Session: Loneliness and Social Isolation in Old Age**

### **“‘Grandma, Hug Me Tight’: Living with a ‘Robot Grandchild’ in South Korea”**

**Heesun Shin and Chihyung Jeon**

South Korea is the most rapidly aging country in the world, with a particularly high proportion of older adults living alone. In response to the diverse social challenges posed by this demographic shift, the South Korean government has turned to technological interventions, including the public distribution of care robots. This presentation explores how a robot developed to tackle the “absolute isolation” of older adults operates. We focus on Hyodol, a stuffed doll-shaped talking robot designed to resemble a grandchild. It offers various features to support healthier and more structured daily routines, such as medication reminders and prompts to take a walk. Programmed to speak these phrases at random moments in the voice and manner of a young child, Hyodol is intended to serve as a cute and reliable companion for older adults living alone.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork at the robot company, regional welfare institutions, and the homes of older adults, we show how the robotic care program relies on and reshapes existing networks of people and institutions. The introduction of robots neither automated eldercare nor replaced human caregivers. Rather, the robot, together with its monitoring system, older adults, institutional managers, caregivers, company staff, and family members, formed an extended network of care. It created new tasks, displaced existing ones, and redistributed responsibilities. This reconfigures everyday caregiving into a dynamic and collaborative process shaped by the interplay between humans, technological systems, and interpretive practices.

### **“The Virtues of Analog: Social Life for Older People in Japan”**

**Aaron Hames**

Japan is experiencing population aging at an unprecedented level. Individuals aged 65 and older make up nearly 1/3 of the population. Concurrent with society’s aging has been a decline in household size. Whereas older people in contemporary Japan routinely grew up in multigeneration households, most now live alone or with a spouse. The social role of grandparent is often unavailable. In this context, social isolation and loneliness both appear to be on the rise. Dotting the news are sensational cases of “lonely death” (*kodokushi*), in which an individual passes away alone and unnoticed. While the Japanese

state continues to implement a variety of programs to develop novel technologies, encourage social integration, and prevent lonely death, these efforts can neglect the perspectives of older people. This paper examines how older people work through medical cooperatives to cultivate social life for themselves as well as aging peers in their neighborhoods. Rather than adopt contemporary technologies, such as smartphones and email, older cooperative members favor the analog world and face-to-face interaction. By setting aside notions of efficiency in favor of time-extensive, collective activities, I argue, older cooperative members enable the development of social life. The ostensible purposes of activities become secondary to the social integration they foster.

### **“The Spectre of Loneliness: Communities of care and engaged aging in Japan”**

**Iza Kavedžija**

The spectre of loneliness is pervasive in contemporary Japanese society, which has increasingly been described as *muen shakai*, a society without social ties or an alienated society. In this paper, I describe multiple ways in which people try to ward off loneliness and create communities of care, craft relationships of support, and remain engaged in older age. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in a community organization in downtown Osaka, I examine multiple ways in which people sustain circulation of care to keep their communities alive. I explore some ways in which people make their lives liveable when their support networks fray and wither, for instance, by cultivating relationships with more-than-human entities and focusing on self-cultivation. Based on recent fieldwork, I discuss the working lives of the elderly, engaged in paid and unpaid employment, and the ways in which working in older age—while not always actively desired and sought after by elders—often inadvertently provides opportunities for involvement and maintaining social ties. Having in my work over the years focused on meaning making, care, connection, and wellbeing, by reading my ethnography in inverse, I trace the affective and moral work performed by loneliness as a moral sentiment that orients people’s actions.

## **Fourth Session: Perspectives on Loneliness and Social Isolation from Disability Studies, Psychosocial and Healthcare**

### **“Isolation, Social Development and Disability: A Cultural-historical Approach”**

**Jan Steffens and Thomas Hoffmann**

The presentation aims to give an overview of historical and current perspectives on the relationship between disability and isolation by examining traces of a theory of social isolation and development. Further, it is our goal to emphasize the significance of the link between isolation and disability for the elaboration of a theoretical framework towards a further understanding of human development. Therefore, we refer mainly to Vygotskij’s cultural-historical theory of development as well as to the materialistic pedagogy of disability by Jantzen, which centers on the concept of isolation as the core of disability. In this line of tradition, disability can be understood as a multidimensional construct that is to be examined from different scientific perspectives (biological, psychological, social), while isolation is a crucial instrument of analysis encompassing all these levels. The category of social isolation emerges in this context as a conceptual tool to reconstruct the interrelations between these levels both empirically and theoretically, thus counteracting a reductionist understanding of disability.

### **“How Social Workers in Japan, Germany, UK and Sweden Have Been Tackling Social Isolation: Exploring the Relationships Between the Experiences of Social Isolation and Welfare Policies”**

**Sachiko Horiguchi**

*Hikikomori* has been widely discussed as a social problem since the 2000s in Japan, often referring to prolonged isolation of an adult-age child who remains dependent on their parents. The dependency is known to extend to a few decades, creating the so-called “80-50 problem” of parents in their 80s sheltering their child in their 50s, with anxieties looming about whether their child can survive after their imminent death. While much existing research on hikikomori has situated it as a “Japanese” mental health issue, our interdisciplinary research team comprised of a sociologist, social policy researchers, and an anthropologist (myself) have been attempting to examine hikikomori as primarily a social welfare issue, with an aim of uncovering the relationships between this form of isolation and the family-dependent nature of the Japanese welfare system. Since 2021, we have been collecting narratives of social

workers and other professionals related to social services in Japan, the UK, Germany and Sweden, eliciting responses to a three-stage-vignette of a typical “80-50” *hikikomori* case of a socially isolated male living with his parents in Japan. This paper will contextualize these narratives from social workers in Japan vis-à-vis those in the U.K., Germany and Sweden where this form of social isolation may often be considered relatively “uncommon”. Through this examination, I will highlight how social workers in these four societies make varied assumptions about the relationships between family and welfare.

### **“Digital Health Literacy for Burnout and Workplace-Related Social Isolation in Japan: Evaluating *kokoro no mimi* Using MAPPinfo”**

**Sebastian Hofstetter**

In contemporary Japan, characterized by demographic shifts, labor shortages burnout and workplace-related social isolation have emerged as pressing public health and labor issues. In response to this growing concern, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) has initiated *kokoro no mimi*, an official burnout and mental health information website designed for working individuals. The site’s target demographic encompasses a wide range of users (e.g., employees, supervisors, employers, family members, occupational health professionals). However, individuals seeking guidance online, whether patients or care providers, are often overwhelmed by an abundance of materials of varying quality.

This presentation is an extension of a previous study by Professor Oberländer of Halle University and me, published in the Japan Yearbook 2024, which has examined the phenomenon of burnout and measures of occupational reintegration. The focus of the present study is on situating *kokoro no mimi* within the broader context of digital health information and examining its potential contribution to digital health literacy (DHL). Ban (2024) defines DHL as the capacity to access, interpret, and act upon digital health content in accordance with personal health objectives.

To gain an initial sense of the quality of *kokoro no mimi* as a digital health information tool, the presentation applies MAPPinfo, a practical checklist developed by public health experts from Austria, Germany, and Norway. MAPPinfo has been developed for utilization by both non-specialists and professionals in the field. It functions as a screening instrument that is based on criteria from the guideline for evidence-based health information.

This presentation constitutes a preliminary effort to contribute to cross-cultural and interprofessional discourse on the assessment of digital health information quality, with a particular focus on that provided by *kokoro no mimi*. Given the absence of evaluation tools specific to Japan, the MAPPinfo checklist was utilized as a pragmatic framework for this preliminary analysis.

## **Fifth Session: Bridging Scholarship and Practice – Addressing Loneliness and Social Isolation from a Practitioners Perspectives**

### **Workshop “TOGETHER Against the RIGHT” by Birgit Redlich**

This workshop draws on experiences from the project “TOGETHER Against the RIGHT. Experiences of Loneliness as a Catalyst for Democratic Distance and Authoritarian Attitudes at Vocational Schools in Germany?”, to empower young people from diverse educational or migrational backgrounds in structurally weak areas, who experienced discrimination and loneliness during the coronavirus pandemic. The project was funded as part of the program “Demokratie leben!” by the BMFSFJ, in cooperation between the Adam von Trott Foundation and the Chair of Sociology of Rural Areas at Georg-August-University Göttingen.

### **Field Trip “Growing Older in the Midst of it All – Active On-Site”, Arbeiterwohlfahrt Hannover e.V. List Nord Ost and Anderten**

#### **Silke Oppenhausen and Stephanie Böhm, Arbeiterwohlfahrt Region Hannover e.V.**

Loneliness affects people who, for very different reasons, experience obstacles and barriers to participation. In this sense, the services offered by AWO Region Hannover e.V., which are aimed at promoting participation, always also work against loneliness. This ranges from services for families with babies, children and young people, to advice and support options and services for older people. After all, loneliness affects senior citizens to a not inconsiderable extent. In the AWO's work with senior citizens, we create offers for people aged 60 and over to enable participation and community and thus counteract loneliness and isolation. In our view, neighborhoods and districts are the key approaches to countering and preventing loneliness. We have meeting places and locations in various parts of the city where people can meet, find support and get actively involved. We are also testing new approaches to neighborhood work: “street work” for older people.