

Student Loneliness: Curating Experiences and Breaking Silences



WRoCAH funded Collaborative Doctoral Award between Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, and The Science Museum, London.

Lead Academic and Partner Organisation Supervisors



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Medicine Galleries

Science Museum



Project summary

This project investigates young peoples' loneliness through a museum-based participatory study involving undergraduate students. It explores student loneliness through objects, beginning with material collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, and continuing with the collection of new materials, through which participants will explore their own experiences of loneliness, post-pandemic. Participants will be involved in curating, collecting, interpreting and exhibiting artefacts, and using these as catalysts for wider conversations about loneliness. This work builds upon a partnership between cultural geographers at the University of Sheffield and curators of medicine at the Science Museum.

PhD Project description

This project builds upon co-produced research in which students and academic staff at the University of Sheffield worked with curators at the Science Museum (SCM) in 2021, exploring students' experiences of loneliness during the pandemic. Outcomes of this collaboration included acquisition by the SCM of archival material and objects relating to student loneliness during lockdown, and an [academic paper](#) describing this project.

What is the project about? Young people are susceptible to loneliness but tend to be good at covering it up. Problems of loneliness, with consequences

for mental and physical health, are increasingly recognised among older people. This project will contribute new knowledge about the relatively neglected phenomenon of youth loneliness by investigating experiences of students in higher education during and since the COVID-19 pandemic.

This project promises methodological and conceptual advances. Through innovative use of material methods, it will examine loneliness as a physical (embodied and material) rather than purely cognitive phenomenon. This work will bring new dimensions to museum practice through innovative community engagement and participatory methods. It will advance the theory and practice of curating and collecting, archiving and preservation, object and collections discovery.

Research questions

1. How do students in higher education understand and describe experiences of loneliness?
2. How can artefacts - (a) SCM holdings in the Collecting COVID-19 scheme; and (b) additional objects, collected by participants - be used to spark memories and stories about loneliness?
3. How can museums use and improve participatory research methods to interpret and develop their collections and public engagement?
4. What new dimensions do arts-led, participatory methods involving objects offer the study of intangible subjects such as loneliness?
5. How can students' experiences of loneliness be extrapolated to develop broader understandings loneliness among other young people and across society?

How do we propose to do this research? The project has a flexible methodology, which is capable of answering the research questions above while leaving the student some freedom to adapt the work to benefit from their experiences, interests and initial skills. The student will divide their time between Sheffield University and the SCM, with joint supervisions alternating between these settings and online. The methodology is designed to investigate a stigmatised subject sensitively, non-intrusively and ethically and involves:

- Working with and adding to the SCM Collecting COVID-19 holdings on student loneliness.
- Working with undergraduate students in Sheffield to participate in workshops, in which to use objects as catalysts for conversations about loneliness.

- Curating exhibitions on students' loneliness to display online and in physical university settings. The exhibitions will elicit stories, memories and experiences of students' loneliness.
- Use notes from workshops, interview transcripts, elicited stories, object labels and photographs of objects to produce academic outputs.
- Conducting public engagement activities through the Science Museum (see below).

About the Science Museum

The studentship will make a two-fold contribution towards the priorities and objectives of the Science Museum through: development of and engagement with the Medicine Collection; and advancing practical understandings of participatory methods for collection and interpretation.

The SCM has embraced a challenging collecting agenda, which is concerned with intangible and stigmatised aspects of health and wellbeing such as mental health. The proposed research would contribute to this broad agenda through its focus upon loneliness.

This project advances a methodological strength of the SCM in the form of community engagement and participatory research. This is an innovative area for museums, resonating with the ambitions of the medicine curators for future engagement with the new Medicine Galleries, for example through community cataloguing (e.g. Thalidomide Project) and the SCM's Open For All commitment, which advances outreach and inclusion.

Engagement, outreach, dissemination and impact initiatives

The doctoral student, working with participants, will curate exhibitions online and physically (see above). They will also be invited to deliver lunchtime seminar(s) at the SCM, lead guided tours in the Medicine Galleries, and collaborate with curators to deliver a public engagement event at the Science Lates. These events are popular with young people including students and will form an important opportunity to engage and reach out to these demographics. This work will also enhance engagement with the new Medicine Galleries, an ambition of the medicine curators (also involving the Science Museum's historic collections including Psychology, Psychiatry & Anthropometry, Public Health & Hygiene). Finally, there is potential for the objects collected and identified through this project to be formally acquired by the SCM.

Financial support

Studentships for doctoral research are 40 months in duration for full-time study. Awards are subject to satisfactory academic progress. Awards must be taken up in October 2024; no deferrals are possible. Awards will comprise fees at Research Council rates and a maintenance grant (£18,622 in 2023/24). The grant pays the fees at the Home/UK rate; international students are, however, eligible to apply for this Studentship and the difference between the Home/UK and International fee will be met by the University of Sheffield for a successful international applicant. Awards may be taken up on a part-time basis if a student is eligible to undertake part-time study; international applicants may be required to study full-time by the terms of their visa.

Qualifications

Strong applicants will have a good first degree in an appropriate subject, as well as a Distinction at Master's degree (or be working towards one) and/or professional experience relevant to the scope of the project.

Residence

Applicants must meet the AHRC's academic criteria and residency requirements, which stipulate that students must be resident in the UK for the majority of their studies and any time spent overseas should be for the purposes of fieldwork/long-term attachment only and only as appropriate for the research.

Requirements of the Studentship

WRoCAH students are required to undertake a bespoke training package and to complete a Researcher Employability Project of at least a month, a Knowledge Exchange Project, and to engage with Internationalisation.

All WRoCAH students must submit their thesis for examination within the funded period. This is a requirement of the Arts & Humanities Research Council, which provides the funding for WRoCAH, and is a condition of accepting a Studentship.

Before applying for any WRoCAH Studentship, please first ensure that you have read the WRoCAH webpages about the WRoCAH training programme and requirements, as well as other funding opportunities

<http://wrocah.ac.uk/>

How to apply

Before applying for any WRoCAH Studentship, please first ensure that you have read the WRoCAH [webpages](#) about Collaborative Doctoral Awards, the WRoCAH training programme and requirements.

By 12 noon Wednesday 6 March 2024, applicants are required to submit to WRoCAH an Expression of Interest, which should include:

1. A CV with details of academic qualifications
2. A covering letter comprising a two-page statement to convey your motivation and enthusiasm for the project, and to demonstrate your suitability for your intended PhD studies with the University and Project Partner.

The covering letter should specifically highlight the following:

- Your interest in the project and details on why you have chosen that University and Project Partner.
- How you will apply your current skills, knowledge and experience to undertake a PhD and the approach you would take to develop the project.
- How the project fits into your career plans and ambitions.

Applications must be submitted via [this Expression of Interest form](#).

15 March 2024: decision on short-listing. The short-list of candidates to be invited for an interview will be announced on Friday 15 March 2024.

- **Short-listed candidates must complete a PhD programme application before interview.** If you are short-listed for an interview you will be sent details of how to apply for a place at the University of Sheffield. At that point you will need to submit the names and contact details of two referees, copies of transcripts of your academic qualifications and (if applicable) an IELTS certificate.
- Interviews will take place on Friday 26th April. Interviews will involve the academic supervisor, Project Partner supervisor and a member of the WRoCAH Studentships Committee. They will be conducted online.

If you have any questions about the project and application process, please contact

Richard Phillips, University of Sheffield (r.phillips@sheffield.ac.uk)

Selina Hurley, Science Museum, London (Selina.Hurley@sciencemuseum.ac.uk)