



Loneliness, Social Cohesion, and the Role of Art Making^{*}

Olivia Sagan and the BHAVI Guardians Committee[†]

Commentary

At the Guardians 2024 Conference, Olivia Sagan, a professor of psychology at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh, delivered an insightful presentation on the intricate relationship between loneliness, social cohesion, and the role of art making. Drawing on her extensive research and phenomenological approach, Sagan offered a comprehensive analysis of how art making can serve as a potent tool for alleviating loneliness and fostering social cohesion within communities.

Sagan began by contextualizing the rising interest in loneliness within the social sciences, noting that this concern parallels an increasing focus on weakening social cohesion (Sagan 2023). Both phenomena, she argued, pose significant threats to well-being and are complexly intertwined with trust and agency (Nyqvist et al. 2016). Despite the inconclusive evidence, there is a growing consensus around the potential of art making to mitigate loneliness and enhance social cohesion (McGrath and Brennan 2011; Perkins et al. 2021).

Central to Sagan's argument was the work of political philosopher Hannah Arendt and contemporary interpretations of her theory of loneliness (Arendt 1973; Arendt 2018). Arendt's insights provide a framework for understanding how art making can be efficacious in community building by facilitating the processes of being seen and showing oneself. This, Sagan posited, can alleviate loneliness and strengthen both individual agency and social cohesion.

Loneliness, now considered a "global health crisis" (Hayden-Nygren 2019) and "behavioral epidemic" (Jeste et al. 2020), has captivated both academic and popular imagination for over two decades. It is widely recognized as a critical public health issue with health policies and interventions being developed (Batanova et al. 2024). However, Sagan highlighted several limitations in the current literature. Much of the research tends to depoliticize loneliness, framing it as a personal failure rather than acknowledging its socio-economic dimensions and the broader societal trends that contribute to it (McLennan and Ulijaszek 2018). This medicalization of loneliness further impedes the recognition that robust, integrated, and holistic approaches are necessary to address public health problems.

Sagan also pointed out the problematic stereotypes and assumptions prevalent in loneliness research, such as the tendency to present loneliness as a universally understood and homogeneously experienced concept. This overlooks the potential role of social contagion and the

cultural context of loneliness (Van Staden and Coetzee 2010). Moreover, there is a significant gap in research on loneliness among minoritized communities and populations with severe mental illness or those living in poverty (Leigh-Hunt et al. 2017).

Importantly, Sagan emphasized the philosophical and psychoanalytic perspectives on loneliness that are often neglected in contemporary formulations. For instance, Carl Jung's assertion that loneliness arises from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself (Jung 1965) prefigures modern understandings of epistemic trust (Li et al. 2023). Additionally, psychoanalysts such as Melanie Klein have explored the developmental value of nurturing the capacity to be alone, suggesting a creative side to the experience of loneliness (Garvey 2023).

Sagan's discussion then shifted to the role of art making in mitigating loneliness and promoting social cohesion. She referenced the growing body of evidence showing that arts participation can enhance well-being and social engagement (Fancourt and Finn 2019; Sajjani and Fietje 2023). Art making, she argued, should be central to community building rather than being a peripheral activity. This principle remains especially relevant in the context of the well-being economy, which emphasizes human and ecological well-being over material growth (Seaford 2011; Fuchs et al. 2021).

Sagan underscored the historical and contemporary significance of art in health, noting that the use of artistic media in healthcare and communities can lead to a variety of positive health outcomes (Law 2012; Kleisaris et al. 2014; Lenette et al. 2015). The practice of arts in health, which operates on a social model of health and well-being, has seen significant growth and recognition since the inaugural issue in 2009 of *Arts & Health* as a scholarly journal for this interdisciplinary field (Camic et al. 2009).

In examining the connection between art making, social cohesion, and loneliness, Sagan highlighted the importance of participatory community arts projects. These projects can promote social cohesion by fostering bridging and bonding connections among individuals, which are crucial for building social capital (Putnam 2000; Putnam 2020). Art making as a communal activity can lead to increased understanding, tolerance, communication, and authentic personal interaction, thereby reducing social exclusion and enhancing mutual respect and empathy (Matarasso 1997; Bowman 2015).

Sagan's reanalysis of data from her studies on community arts activity revealed that art making facilitates connection on multiple levels: connection to oneself, to others, to the artwork, to trust, and to disclosure and showing. Participants described how art making allowed them

^{*} Presented 2024-10-09 by Olivia Sagan at Guardians 2024 with slides and video. This summary of her presentation prepared by the BHAVI Guardians Committee.

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to explore and express their inner experiences, leading to a sense of validation and recognition. This process of being seen through one's art, and the subsequent feedback and validation from others, was crucial for mitigating feelings of loneliness and fostering a sense of agency and belonging.

Drawing on Hannah Arendt's concept of agency, Sagan argued that art making enables individuals to appear as unique selves in the world, thereby counteracting the isolation and vulnerability that contribute to loneliness. This appearance in the world, facilitated by art making, fosters a sense of collectivity and agency, which are essential for social cohesion and democratic participation (Arendt 1973; Lucas 2019).

Sagan concluded her talk by emphasizing the need for interdisciplinary approaches to loneliness that incorporate insights from philosophy, psychoanalysis, political science, and the arts. She called for the development of inclusive and localized art making initiatives that can nurture quality interactions and foster social cohesion. Such initiatives, she argued, are vital for promoting well-being and human flourishing in contemporary society. In the subsequent discussion during the Q&A session, Sagan addressed several pertinent questions.

Carl Taswell raised the issue of the economic challenges faced by arts programs and the need to monetize the benefits of art making to ensure their sustainability. Sagan acknowledged the difficulty of quantifying the impact of art making but highlighted studies that have shown symptom reduction and decreased healthcare utilization as a result of arts participation. She cautioned, however, against reducing the value of art making to purely economic terms, emphasizing the broader social and psychological benefits.

Julie Neidich inquired about the distinction between being alone and experiencing loneliness. Sagan elaborated on the importance of differentiating between solitude, which is often positive and chosen, and loneliness, which is a more complex and negative emotional state. She highlighted the potential benefits of loneliness, such as increased creativity and self-reflection, and the importance of understanding the nuanced experiences of individuals.

Olivia Sagan's presentation (slides and video) at the Guardians 2024 Conference provided a comprehensive and thought-provoking exploration of the role of art making in addressing loneliness and promoting social cohesion. Her interdisciplinary approach and emphasis on the phenomenological experiences of individuals offered valuable insights into the complex interplay between art, loneliness, social cohesion, and the well-being of communities.

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