palgrave pivot

Beyond Loneliness

Experiences of Individual and Community Social Connection

Jane Farmer
Milovan Savic
Tracy De Cotta

OPEN ACCESS

palgrave
macmillan

Beyond Loneliness

Jane Farmer · Milovan Savic · Tracy De Cotta

Beyond Loneliness

Experiences of Individual and Community Social Connection

palgrave
macmillan

Jane Farmer
Social Innovation Research Institute
Swinburne University of Technology
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Milovan Savic
Social Innovation Research Institute
Swinburne University of Technology
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Tracy De Cotta
Social Innovation Research Institute
Swinburne University of Technology
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

ISBN 978-981-96-9508-9 ISBN 978-981-96-9509-6 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-9509-6

This work was supported by the Australian Research Council (LP200301335).

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2026. This book is an open access publication.

Open Access This book is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.
The images or other third party material in this book are included in the book's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the book's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.
The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.
The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover credit: © Harvey Loake

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.
The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.

Acknowledgements First and foremost, we acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the unceded lands on which this work was conceived and developed. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters, and culture.

This book was inspired by the hearts and voices of 44 individuals who shared their journeys of connection and isolation as part of our Australian Research Council Linkage Project, *'Activating Social Connection to Address Isolation in Australia.'* We are particularly grateful to the six participants whose stories form most of Chapter 3 of this book.

This work was made possible through funding from the Australian Research Council Linkage Project (LP200301335) and funding and support from our collaborative industry partners—Australian Red Cross, Neami National, City of Casey, City of Whittlesea, City of Wyndham, and Today Design.

We extend our thanks to our Chief Investigators team—Anthony McCosker, Andrew Butt, Annette Kroen, Diane Sivasubramaniam, and Adam Karg. Their expertise from different disciplines of knowledge and lively inputs to discussions helped interpret findings and refine the social connection model. They are also just great people, and we thank them for being 'our friends'!

The contributions of our PhD student Jayme Verhagen and Masters student Ben Shaw have also enriched the project. We'd also like to think our partner organisation representatives including Kath Currey, Caro Dimond, Priscilla Ennals, Hannah Roeschlein, and Raffael Di Bartolomeo from Neami National; Nadja Koller, Sarah Soteriou, Safiullah Taye, and Lauren Lombardi from Red Cross; Sebastian Cunningham and Janet Reid from Casey Council; Dave Hamra, Pat Rayner, and Ruth Mihelcic from Wyndham Council; and Karol Anfuso from Whittlesea Council. We would also like to acknowledge the original industry partner team that committed to the project including Kirra Johnson, Christian Stenta, Adam Morris, Callan Rowe, Belgin Besum, and Nick Grant-Collins.

Other allies have been supportive of our social connection projects, including Jasmine Knox, Gurvinder Kaur, and Rajna Ogrin. We'd also like to thank the many people we met along the way, from government departments, councils, community organisations, and community members. A special thanks goes to Ebony Gaylor, who kicked us off on this road of researching social connection back in 2017.

We hope everyone gets something out of this little book, which has been such a collective endeavour.

Jane Farmer
Milovan Savic
Tracy De Cotta

Competing Interests Declaration The authors declare that they have no competing interests relevant to this work.

Ethics Approval Statement This project was approved by Swinburne University of Technology (Melbourne) Human Research Ethics Committee in accordance with the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (reference number 20225828-9100).

Contents

About the Authors

Jane Farmer is Professor of Health and Social Innovation at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia. She also works as an independent consultant. Jane has a background in research with communities and practice organisations in projects involving community co-design, social enterprises, community health, rural communities, and community-generated data projects. She has published over 200 peer-reviewed journal articles, and five books. Jane was previously Director of Swinburne Social Innovation Research Institute and Associate Pro Vice Chancellor, Research in Science, Health & Engineering at La Trobe University. Before this, in Scotland, she established the University of the Highlands and Islands Rural Health Research and Policy Centre and ran several EU-funded projects involving rural community co-production of health and social services.

Milovan Savic is a Research Fellow at Swinburne University and part of the Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society (ADM+S). Having studied and worked across three countries on two continents, he brings a global perspective to his research on how digital technologies influence human connection, social cohesion, and community life. His work explores the everyday ways individuals engage with technology—focusing on data literacy, digital inclusion privacy, and AI governance—and how these shape relationships for individuals, families, and communities. Drawing on

extensive experience in youth and intercultural work, Milovan combines rigorous qualitative research with a deep commitment to understanding diverse lived experiences. He is committed to making knowledge accessible beyond academic confines and turning research findings into practical solutions for individuals and communities.

Tracy De Cotta is an urban planner turned researcher who explores the intersection of places, spaces, and wellbeing. As a Research Associate at both Swinburne University's Social Innovation Research Institute and the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making & Society (ADM+S), she investigates how our physical and digital environments shape mental health and social connection, and influence community building and resilience. With degrees in urban planning and community development, Tracy brings a decade of research experience to her work, employing innovative methods like co-design, co-production, and qualitative GIS mapping to understand diverse lived experiences and visualise the impact of spaces on individual and community wellbeing, and resilience. Drawing on her own experience growing up as a third-culture kid of immigrant parents navigating Australian suburbia, she aims to translate research into practical tools, frameworks, and resources that support individuals, communities, and organisations to thrive.

List of Figures

List of Tables

CHAPTER 1

Social Connection: An Interdisciplinary Model for Understanding and Action

Abstract Current approaches to understanding and addressing social connection are fragmented, often focusing narrowly on loneliness as a health crisis. While evidence links social isolation and loneliness to negative health outcomes, this medicalised framing has led to individualised interventions that may not fully address the complexity of social connection. This chapter argues for moving beyond crisis narratives towards a more comprehensive understanding of how social connection develops and can be supported. We present an interdisciplinary model that bridges individual experiences with community infrastructure and processes, drawing on insights from sociology, psychology, urban planning, media studies, and community development. The model provides a strengths-based framework for understanding social connection across different levels—from individual relationship patterns to community infrastructure and socialisation processes. After reviewing current evidence and policy responses, we demonstrate how the model helps overcome limitations in existing approaches. We illustrate the model's practical application across different contexts, including digital environments, through practitioner vignettes. The chapter concludes by showing how this comprehensive framework can inform research, policy, and practice approaches to fostering social connection.

Keywords Social connection · Social infrastructure · Interdisciplinary approach · Community development · Policy interventions · Strengths-based approach · Social prescribing

© The Author(s) 2026

J. Farmer et al., *Beyond Loneliness*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-9509-6_1

Beyond the Crisis Narrative: Setting the Scene

Modern society has become preoccupied with loneliness as a health crisis. Terms like '*epidemic*' (Sachs et al., 2024), '*pandemic*' (Haslam et al., 2024), and even '*leprosy of our time*' (Alberti, 2019, p. 1) are regularly deployed to describe rising rates of loneliness across populations. Recent statistics reinforce this narrative, with one in three Americans reporting weekly experiences of loneliness (American Psychiatric Association, 2024), and more than one in five people globally saying they often feel lonely (Dugan, 2024). This narrow framing of loneliness as primarily a health issue, while drawing needed attention to the problem, has led to fragmented approaches and solutions that may not fully address the complexity of human social connection.

Understanding social connection matters for multiple stakeholders. For policymakers, it's crucial for developing effective interventions that can address rising loneliness rates while supporting community wellbeing. For practitioners across health, community development, and social services, it affects how they design and deliver programs that can meaningfully impact on people's lives. For researchers, it presents complex questions about how different factors, across disciplinary boundaries, shape people's ability to form and maintain relationships. Perhaps most importantly, for communities and individuals, a better understanding of social connection can inform how we build and sustain the relationships essential to human flourishing and wellbeing.

This book argues for moving beyond the current crisis narrative to develop a more comprehensive understanding of social connection. We present an interdisciplinary model that bridges individual experiences with community infrastructure and processes, offering insights for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners alike. Our approach draws from multiple disciplines, including sociology, psychology, cognitive science, urban planning, and related fields, each contributing distinct yet complementary perspectives on social connection. Importantly, we take a strengths-based approach, focusing on building and enhancing social connection rather than merely addressing deficits of loneliness or social isolation.

The book has three main aims. First, we highlight the range of knowledge valuable to understanding and fostering social connection. Second, we present a novel strengths-based, interdisciplinary model for conceptualising social connection. Third, we share new empirical research evidence

about diverse people's social connections, demonstrating how this model can illuminate lived experiences and inform practical responses.

In this first chapter, we examine why current approaches to loneliness and social connection often fall short, introduce our interdisciplinary model, and demonstrate its value through practical applications. This sets the foundation for the empirical research presented in subsequent chapters, culminating in Chapter 4 where we present a revised and enhanced version of the model that integrates insights from our research findings.

This chapter is structured in four main parts. First, we examine the current context and limitations of existing approaches to loneliness and social connection. Second, we present our interdisciplinary model, showing how it synthesises insights from multiple fields. Third, we demonstrate the model's practical application across different settings. Finally, we explore how the model helps understand social connection in digital contexts.

The Health Crisis Narrative: Current Context

The dominant narrative around loneliness and social isolation focuses primarily on their health impacts. Literature syntheses consistently link these experiences to harmful physical and mental health outcomes, affecting cardiovascular disease progression, autonomic nervous system function, blood pressure, cancer rates, and wound healing (Umberson & Karas Montez, 2010). A frequently cited meta-analysis concluded that social isolation and lack of social support carry a mortality risk equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes daily (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). For mental health, loneliness is associated with anxiety, depression, dementia, suicidal ideation, and death by suicide (Mann et al., 2022).

This health-focused framing has intensified since the COVID pandemic, particularly in research and policy. While scholarly interest in loneliness and social isolation has been ongoing, there has been an exponential rise in health-discipline research since 2020. The linking of relationship deficits to poor health outcomes has contributed to what could be termed a societal panic about loneliness and social isolation. These experiences have shifted from being personally emotionally painful to becoming health conditions that could be fatal. Public health practitioners increasingly highlight the urgent need for action (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023; WHO, 2024a).

This heightened concern might seem peculiar when populations face numerous extreme social and health challenges, from record homelessness rates (Security.org, 2024) to increasing sexually transmitted infections (WHO, 2024b). However, loneliness has come to be seen as emblematic of broader societal challenges—and importantly, as potentially solvable. This has led to loneliness being increasingly depicted '*like an illness that can be treated*' (Goldman et al., 2024, p. 14).

Yet this medical framing of loneliness presents several challenges. While social isolation can be measured through counting social contacts and interaction frequency, loneliness remains more nebulous. Some describe it as a contagious emotion spreading across physical and online social networks (Cacioppo et al., 2009; Masi et al., 2011). Others emphasise social connection as the solution, noting that friendship quantity is the strongest predictor of health, happiness, and life satisfaction (Dunbar, 2021), offering protection against depression (De Risio et al., 2024b). However, while important, this focus on health risks overlooking the broader social, cultural, and community dimensions of connection.

This book takes a different approach. Rather than viewing loneliness and social connection purely through a health lens, we explore these phenomena as complex experiences within various contexts that demand insights from multiple knowledge domains. This broader perspective acknowledges that a person's social connection affects and is affected by, many aspects of individual and community life. It recognises that addressing social connection has become central to diverse professional roles—public health workers, urban planners, psychologists, and community development workers. Each brings valuable knowledge and practical insights that, when combined, can better inform our understanding and responses. This multi-perspective approach allows us to move beyond deficit-focused interventions towards more comprehensive, strengths-based solutions.

Understanding Social Connection: Multiple Perspectives

Understanding social connection requires drawing together insights from multiple disciplines, each offering distinct yet complementary perspectives (see Table 1.1). These different viewpoints help explain both individual experiences and broader social patterns of connection.

Table 1.1 Disciplinary contributions to understanding social connection

Discipline	*Key contribution*	*Core concepts*	*Key insights*
Sociology	Social networks, group dynamics	Social capital, social cohesion	How relationships form and function within broader social structures (Putnam, 2015); Impact of social networks on resources and support (Lin, 2002); Positive and negative ('dark') aspects of social capital (Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2017)
Psychology	Individual experiences, relationship formation	Attachment, belonging, identity	Need to belong as fundamental motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 2017); Impact on wellbeing and health outcomes (Stewart-Brown, 2005); Social identity processes (Turner, 1975)
Anthropology	Cultural patterns, relationship structures	Social brain hypothesis, kinship networks	Universal patterns in human relationship formation (Dunbar, 1998, 2021); Cultural variations in social connection (Igami et al., 2023)
Urban Planning	Physical infrastructure, community spaces	Third places, social infrastructure	Impact of built environment on connection (Bower et al., 2023); Links between urban form and health outcomes (Davern et al, 2017); Evidence for interventions (Banwell & Kingham, 2023; Bild & Pachana, 2022)
Public Health	Population wellbeing, health impacts	Social determinants of health	Links between social connection and health outcomes (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010)
Digital Media Studies	Online interaction, platform effects, digital communities	Digital social connection ecosystem, ambient co-presence	How digital platforms shape connection patterns (Savic et al., 2025); Integration of online and offline relationships (Hall et al., 2022)

Table 1.1 presents key disciplinary contributions to understanding social connection, focusing on perspectives most relevant to our model. While not exhaustive, these represent significant theoretical and empirical insights that inform our interdisciplinary approach. We acknowledge that this categorisation is somewhat artificial, as many key concepts cross disciplinary boundaries and scholars work across multiple fields. The table

serves to illustrate the diverse perspectives that inform our understanding of social connection while recognising the inherently interdisciplinary nature of this work.

Within this multi-disciplinary context, several concepts require closer examination. Loneliness is commonly defined as '*the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relations is deficient in some important way*' (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Different types have been identified, including emotional loneliness (absence of intimate relationships), social loneliness (lack of friend networks) (Weiss, 1973), existential loneliness (disconnection from human existence) (Ettema, 2010, in Gil Álvarez et al., 2023), and collective loneliness (absence of meaningful social identity) (Cacioppo et al., 2015).

Social isolation, while often discussed alongside loneliness, refers to an objective lack of social contacts. It's typically measured through indicators like household composition, communication frequency, family and friend contacts, and group participation (Zavaleta et al., 2017). Importantly, loneliness and social isolation are only weakly correlated—feeling lonely isn't necessarily a consequence of being socially isolated, as people experience these states differently (Cacioppo et al., 2011; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

The need for social connection has gained prominence since the COVID pandemic, though it has a longer policy history. The OECD's Wellbeing Framework (2024) includes 'social connections' as a key domain, and it is defined broadly as 'the ways that people interact with and relate to one another' (Mahoney et al., 2024, p. 5). Recent policy uses various related terms, including social inclusion, social capital, and social cohesion (Goldman et al., 2024). This diversity reflects application of social connection as an umbrella term, encompassing 'inclusion in wider society, connecting with others, social 'resources,' addressing social deficit, addressing loneliness and improving mental health' (Goldman et al., 2024, p. 10).

To enable measurement and evaluation, the OECD has identified four key components of social connection. These include the structure of social relationships (including roles and interactions), their function (actual or perceived support), quality (both positive and negative aspects), and communal connectedness (how individuals relate to larger group entities) (Mahoney et al., 2024). These components reflect insights from multiple disciplines about how social connection operates at both individual and societal levels.

In our own research, we define social connection as 'an individual's subjective evaluation of the structures of their relationships, access to resources and support, quality of their relationships and their perceived feelings of connection' (Verhagen et al., 2025, p. 2). This definition acknowledges the diversity of ways that people use to explain their social connection, while also drawing on a review of measurement scales (Verhagen et al., 2025).

This overview highlights both the complexity of social connection and the limitations of current approaches. While extensive research exists, it often remains siloed within disciplines, focusing on either individual or community levels, but rarely both. This suggests the need for an integrative framework that can bridge these divides and inform more effective responses.

Limitations of Current Approaches

Despite considerable research and policy attention, several limitations characterise current approaches to understanding and addressing social connection. First, while loneliness and social isolation are widely accepted as health problems, aspects of the evidence remain inconclusive or contested (see Table 1.2).

Second, current approaches often neglect important contextual factors. While demographic changes, shifting family structures, and technological advancement are frequently cited as causes of loneliness (De Risio et al., 2024a; Sachs et al., 2024), deeper analysis of how living conditions affect social connection remains limited. For instance, studies show those in precarious work situations, experiencing poverty, or managing mental ill-health have reduced access to supportive, quality relationships (Doroud et al., 2018; Stewart-Brown, 2005). Understanding the influence of context is relevant for developing effective solutions.

Third, the dominant health-focused narrative may overlook important developmental and cultural considerations. Evidence suggests childhood and young adulthood are significant stages for developing social connection capabilities, indicating the potential value of school-based programs and parental education (Stewart-Brown, 2005). Cultural expectations also influence experiences of loneliness. Igami et al. (2023) found that feelings of loneliness can manifest differently in collective versus individualistic cultures, often relating to unfulfilled social expectations rather than absolute levels of social contact.

Table 1.2 Key uncertainties in current evidence

Common assumption	*Current evidence*
People are lonelier now than in the past	Not proven. Varying measurement approaches and small sample sizes prevent reliable historical comparison (Mahoney et al., 2024)
The association between loneliness, social isolation, and health outcomes is direct and causal	Not proven. While these factors are associated, evidence shows only a weak correlation between loneliness and social isolation, and causation hasn't been established. People may experience social isolation without feeling lonely, and vice versa (Cacioppo et al., 2011; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Cross-sectional studies demonstrate correlation but cannot establish causal relationships
Loneliness and social isolation have the same health effects	Unclear. Some research suggests social isolation links more strongly to physical health outcomes, while loneliness is associated more with psychological outcomes (Mahoney et al., 2024)
Loneliness leads to mental ill-health	Unclear. Evidence suggests a '*complex two-directional relationship*' between mental health and social isolation or loneliness (Di Perna et al., 2022, p. 10)

Fourth, current approaches sometimes neglect the negative aspects of social relationships. In promoting social connection as universally beneficial, evidence about the harmful effects of violent or abusive relationships (Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2017) or restrictive social networks may be overlooked. Research evidence suggests that relationship stability, rather than quality, most significantly impacts health outcomes (Don et al., 2024), indicating the need to focus on securing stable social relationships.

These limitations point to the need for a more comprehensive approach to understanding and supporting social connection. Such an approach must bridge individual and community levels of analysis, enabling us to see how personal experiences connect to broader social patterns. It needs to account for contextual and cultural factors that shape how people experience and pursue social connection. It must acknowledge both positive and negative aspects of social relationships, avoiding oversimplified solutions. Perhaps most importantly, it needs to support practical intervention

while maintaining theoretical rigour. This is where an interdisciplinary model becomes valuable, allowing us to draw on diverse knowledge traditions while maintaining a focus on practical application.

Our interdisciplinary model, developed through collaboration with multiple practitioners and organisations, and grounded in research from across disciplines, addresses these limitations while providing a practical framework for action.

An Interdisciplinary Model of Social Connection

The limitations of current approaches, combined with the complex nature of social connection, led to our development of an interdisciplinary conceptual model. This model originated from work with the Australian Red Cross, where they identified that many of their programs essentially targeted enhanced social interaction, yet each operated with different terminology and sought different outcomes. Their programs ranged from supporting new immigrants to achieve social inclusion to preventing social isolation among older people through telephone contact to building disaster resilience through collective community action. They sought a unified, evidence-based model that could move beyond focusing on loneliness deficits towards a strengths-based approach to social connection.

The resulting model comprises three interconnected elements: (1) Individual Social Connection; (2) Community Social Connection Infrastructure; and (3) The Socialisation Process. This structure acknowledges that social connection operates at both individual and community levels, while recognising that developing social relationships takes time and follows identifiable patterns.

Individual Social Connection

The first element of the model addresses individual-level social connection patterns (see Fig. 1.1). At its centre are 'circles of social connection,' drawing on Dunbar's social brain hypothesis, which has been validated across various cultural and historical contexts (Dunbar, 1993, 1998; Dunbar & Spoors, 1995; Dunbar et al., 2015). This approach allows us to understand how people's relationships are generally structured while acknowledging that individuals in different situations may have different numbers of relationships.

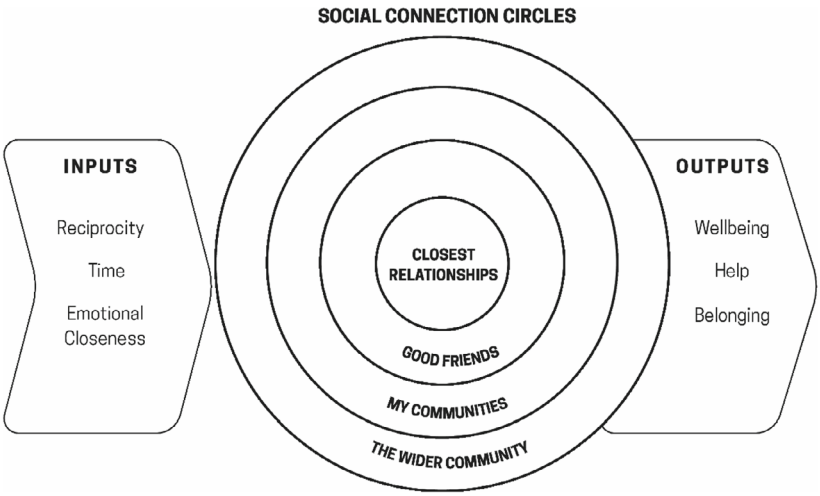

Fig. 1.1 Individual social connection element of model

The Individual Social Connection element of the model is briefly explained below.

- **Closest Relationships (Inner Circle)**: These provide emotional support and intimate connection. Typically including close family members and intimate friends, these relationships require significant time investment and emotional closeness but offer the deepest support (Dunbar, 2021).
- **Good Friends (Support Circle)**: These social allies offer help, advice, and regular social interaction. This circle often includes close friends and some family members who, while not in daily contact, provide reliable support when needed (Hill & Dunbar, 2003).
- **My Communities (Groups Circle)**: These connections come through group memberships including workplace colleagues, sports teams, and community groups. While less emotionally intense than inner circles, these relationships provide important social identity and belonging (Turner, 1975).
- **Wider Community (Outer Circle)**: These daily life interactions with acquaintances, local shopkeepers, and others in our community

create a sense of place and recognition. While seemingly superficial, these connections contribute significantly to wellbeing (Pahl & Spencer, 2010).

This circles pattern appears consistently across cultures and historical periods, from medieval villages to modern social media networks (Alessandretti et al., 2018; MacCarron et al., 2016). It resonates with other theoretical framings, such as Granovetter's distinction between strong and weak ties (1973), and Thoits' categorisation of primary and secondary social bonds (2011).

The model identifies three key inputs necessary for maintaining social relationships. First, time investment through regular contact and shared experiences builds and maintains connections. Second, emotional closeness or the emotion invested varies by relationship type and intensity. Third, reciprocity—the willingness to both give and receive support—helps sustain relationships over time.

These inputs generate three main categories of outcomes. Belonging encompasses identity formation, acceptance, and security (Baumeister & Leary, 2017). Help involves accessing practical support, information, and resources through social connections. Wellbeing reflects the physical and mental health benefits that arise from social connection.

Community Social Connection Infrastructure

The second element of the model recognises that individual social connection doesn't occur in a vacuum but requires supportive community infrastructure (see Fig. 1.2). This infrastructure encompasses both physical and social elements that enable relationships to form and flourish.

A set of foundational qualities underpin effective social connection infrastructure. Physical, emotional, and cultural safety are prerequisites for social interaction, creating environments where people feel secure enough to engage with others. Accessibility matters both in terms of physical access and creating an inclusive welcome, ensuring diverse community members can participate. Predictability through regular opening hours and consistent service standards helps people plan their social interactions, while having multiple options for different preferences and needs ensures various community members can find ways to connect that suit them.

The physical aspects of social connection infrastructure centre on spaces and places that enable different types of interaction. Here, we

Fig. 1.2 Community social connection infrastructure element of model

understand spaces broadly as more generic types of areas or locations such as open spaces or public spaces shaped by interactions (Massey, 2005). Places are understood as specific spaces transformed through experience, attachment, and memory to become familiar and meaningful such as the local shop or café (Tuan, 1977). Regular meeting points, where people frequently encounter the same other people, are crucial for building recognition and potential relationships. These include schools and community centres, religious facilities, and parks and recreational spaces. Equally important is design that facilitates interaction, creating what Bess and Doykos (2014) term 'bumping spaces' where casual encounters occur naturally. Such design includes gathering points like community noticeboards and public art, spaces that encourage lingering and conversation, and mixed-use areas that bring diverse people together.

Activities form another crucial element of social connection infrastructure, fostering various forms of connection. Community events and festivals create vibrancy and enable first encounters with diverse community members (O'Shea & Léime, 2012). Regular groups and classes build the frequency of meetings that develop trust, while collective rituals—such as singing, dancing, or praying together—generate shared emotional experiences (Dunbar, 2023). Problem-solving activities help people know each other through active interaction, creating deeper connections through shared purpose.

Finally, community connectors play an important role in facilitating relationships between others (Wallace et al., 2020). These include natural connectors—community members who instinctively link others; professional roles like social prescribers and community development workers; trained volunteers who support connection-building; and organisation leaders who create opportunities for interaction. These connectors help activate the physical infrastructure and activities, turning the potential for connection into actual relationship-building.

The Socialisation Process

The third element acknowledges that developing social relationships takes time and follows identifiable patterns (see Fig. 1.3). To conceptualise this process, we adapted Haski-Leventhal and Bargal's (2008) model of how volunteers socialise into organisations, as it captures the gradual building of trust and familiarity that characterises all social relationship development.

The socialisation process typically begins with initial contact, characterised by anxiety, uncertainty, and limited knowledge about group norms. This stage is particularly precarious—newcomers may feel out of

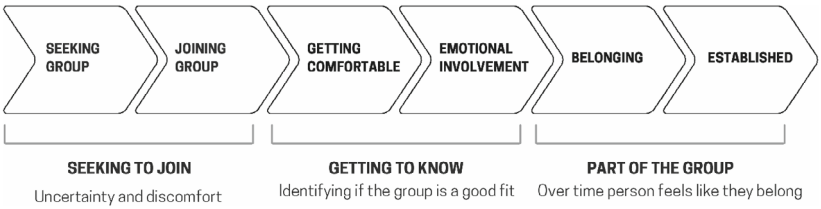

Fig. 1.3 The socialisation process element of model

place or uncertain about continuing participation. Having a friend or mentor to accompany them during early encounters can be crucial for maintaining engagement.

As people continue to participate, they enter a trust-building phase. Through repeat attendance, they become familiar with other group members and begin to understand a group's dynamics. This period involves assessing whether they 'fit' with the group while simultaneously learning its formal and informal rules. The investment of time allows for multiple interactions that build recognition and comfort.

Commitment develops gradually through these repeated interactions. People may stay involved because they develop genuine affection for group members, or because they feel obligations to others, or due to the 'sunk costs' of their involvement. Whatever the motivation, this stage often involves taking on responsibilities and developing reciprocal relationships with others in the group.

The final stage involves either maintained commitment or evolution of involvement. Some people become core group members or take on leadership roles. Others may reduce participation or leave to find groups that better match their changing needs. Understanding this as a natural part of the process helps avoid seeing departures as failures.

This socialisation process element of the model helps explain why many social connection interventions fail—they often don't account for the time and support needed for enduring relationships to form. Quick-fix solutions that don't recognise these stages are unlikely to generate lasting relationships.

Bringing the Model Together

The three elements of the model—individual circles, community infrastructure, and the socialisation process—create a unique framework that bridges theoretical understanding with practical application. By drawing together insights from sociology (social networks and capital), psychology (relationship formation and maintenance), urban planning (physical infrastructure), and related fields, it offers several distinctive advantages for different stakeholders.

For practitioners, the model provides clear intervention points at both individual and community levels, while acknowledging the time needed for genuine connection. It helps identify where and how to support connection-building, whether through enhancing physical infrastructure,

supporting group formation, or facilitating individual relationship development.

For researchers, it offers a structured way to examine how different factors interact in creating and maintaining social relationships. The model's multi-level perspective enables the investigation of both micro-level relationship dynamics and macro-level community patterns, helping bridge traditional research divides.

For policymakers, it demonstrates why multi-level, sustained approaches are needed rather than quick-fix solutions. It shows how different policy domains—from urban planning to public health—can contribute to supporting social connection.

Perhaps most significantly, the model helps move beyond the current crisis narrative around loneliness towards a more constructive focus on building social connection. It acknowledges complexity while remaining accessible, is theoretical while staying practical, and is comprehensive while maintaining clarity of purpose. This strengths-based approach recognises existing community assets and individual capabilities while identifying areas where support might be needed.

The value of this comprehensive approach becomes particularly evident when examining current policy responses to loneliness and social connection challenges.

From Model to Practice: Policy Responses and Interventions

Policy attention to loneliness and social connection has intensified internationally, reflecting a growing recognition of their significance to population wellbeing. A review of 52 countries found 14 countries with policies explicitly addressing social connection or loneliness (Goldman et al., 2024). Governments of Japan and the UK have appointed Loneliness Ministers, while the World Health Organisation established a Commission on Social Connection in 2024, aiming to have it recognised as a global health priority.

These policy directions reveal both opportunities and challenges in addressing social connection. While policies often frame loneliness as a universal challenge that 'can affect anyone,' they typically identify specific at-risk populations. The US Surgeon General's framework, for example, highlights higher prevalence among 'people with poor physical or mental health, disabilities, financial insecurity, those who live alone,

single parents, younger and older people… lower-income adults…individuals from ethnic and racial minority groups, LGBTQ+ individuals, rural residents, victims of domestic violence and those who experience discrimination or marginalisation' (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023, p. 19). This reinforces the idea that loneliness and social isolation are associated with other factors of disadvantage.

Policy Implementation Challenges: Understanding the Barriers

Several factors complicate the implementation of social connection policies. First is the institutional location of responsibility. While the USA places social connection policy within public health, the UK houses it in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport while declaring it a cross-departmental issue focused on preventing mental ill-health (UK Government, 2023). This variation reflects a broader uncertainty about whether social connection is primarily a health, cultural, or social issue—an uncertainty our model suggests is misplaced, as social connection inherently spans all these domains.

The diversity of desired outcomes presents a second challenge. Policy reviews reveal targets ranging from increased social capital to improved social inclusion and enhanced social cohesion (Goldman et al., 2024). While this multiplicity of goals reflects social connection's complexity, it can complicate program design and evaluation. Our model suggests these various outcomes might be better understood as interconnected aspects of social connection rather than competing goals.

Third, despite growing policy attention, few countries have allocated significant new resources to social connection initiatives (Goldman et al., 2024). This limited funding may reflect lack of real commitment to loneliness as a priority, perhaps linked to uncertainty about which interventions most effectively promote social connection—a challenge our model helps address by identifying multiple potential intervention points.

Key Policy Interventions

While various approaches to improving social connection have been implemented internationally, four types of interventions have gained particular traction. Table 1.3 summarises these key interventions, their theoretical foundations, and available evidence of their impact. Notably, while these interventions are widely implemented, the evidence base for

their effectiveness lacks rigour, reflecting broader challenges in evaluating social connection initiatives.

The diversity of these interventions reflects multiple approaches to addressing social connection. However, while all have their champions, scaling up and securing ongoing funding remain challenging, primarily due to limitations in evidence of effectiveness (Goldman et al., 2024;

Table 1.3 Key policy-led social connection interventions

Intervention	*Description and theory of change*	*Implementation and impact*
Social Prescribing	Healthcare practitioners refer people to community activities via link workers who assess needs and facilitate engagement. Works by activating people's sense of identity as part of a group, leading to feelings of group belonging	Originated in UK; now adopted in 17 countries (Haslam et al., 2024). Qualitative evidence shows benefits through enhanced group identity and social support, though quantitative evaluation remains challenging due to varied patient experiences (Staras et al., 2024)
Men's Sheds	Community-based organisations providing spaces for men to work together on practical projects. Based on evidence that men often bond better 'shoulder to shoulder' rather than 'face to face'	Originated in Australia in the 1990s; expanded to UK, Ireland, Canada, and New Zealand. Growing international adoption suggests promise, though systematic evaluation of social connection impacts continues
Community Gardens	Shared spaces for growing food and developing relationships through collective activity. Brings together diverse community members through shared purposeful activity to generate collaboration and trust	Bringing together people from different backgrounds and ages, making gardens collectively generates collaboration, trust-building, and cultural exchange, fosters belonging to place and shared purpose (Tracey et al., 2023). Widespread adoption internationally. Often integrated with other community development initiatives
Social Enterprises	Organisations blending social and commercial objectives to create supportive work environments. Engages disadvantaged people in productive activity while building relationships	Various models have been adopted globally, often targeting specific population groups or community needs (Teasdale, 2016). Hard to prove long-term impacts

Mahoney et al., 2024). Current literature predominantly features evaluations of small-scale interventions and qualitative studies, with diverse outcome measures making comparison difficult (Bild & Pachana, 2022).

Social prescribing illustrates these evaluation complexities. Recent reviews conclude that while quantitative studies are difficult due to confounding factors and varied patient experiences, substantial qualitative evidence demonstrates benefits including enhanced group identity, social support, and self-efficacy over longer periods (Bild & Pachana, 2022; Staras et al., 2024). Similar patterns emerge across other interventions, where social connection benefits often appear as secondary outcomes alongside a primary focus like employment or skills development.

This examination of policy responses reveals a fundamental tension: while countries increasingly recognise the importance of addressing loneliness and improving social connection, they struggle with where to locate responsibility and how to measure impact. The challenge partly stems from social connection's complex nature—is it primarily a health issue, a social inclusion challenge, or a matter of building community social capital? Our model suggests it is *all* of these, requiring coordinated action across multiple domains rather than siloed approaches.

The Model in Practice

While policy responses struggle with evidence and implementation challenges, practitioners have found practical value in applying our social connection model. The following three cases illustrate distinctive applications of the model across different practice settings. The cases are based on discussions with three practitioners, based across Australia, who have used the model in different aspects of their work.

Community Development Practice

A community development worker supporting immigrant and refugee families demonstrates how the model bridges cultural and practical divides. Using the model as a 'boundary object'—a shared reference point for discussions—they found ways to make complex social connection concepts accessible to diverse community members.

> 'Sometimes action is hard to get happening,' they explain. 'To get a community to action together, you need to have something to discuss, a thing.'

The model proved particularly valuable because it combines visual elements and basic language while maintaining research credibility:

> 'Sometimes research can be confronting when you are working with community,' the practitioner notes. 'But this helped people talk about their experiences and relate them to the model, while also reflecting on dimensions they hadn't thought of before.'

This case shows how the model's attention to both individual and community-level factors helps structure discussions about using local resources effectively. It particularly demonstrates how the socialisation process element helps practitioners explain the time needed for genuine connections to develop.

Local Government Planning

The second case illustrates how the model helps integrate different aspects of community infrastructure. A facilities manager in an urban fringe council used the model to help various departments recognise their distinct yet interconnected roles in fostering social connection. The model proved particularly valuable in presentations to new councillors and senior managers:

> 'It helps to have the discussion about where they impact on social connection,' they explain. 'It's not just about that individual being connected aspect, but how spaces and places, activities and people can impact.'

The manager also noted using the model as a kind of checklist of features that need attention. They noted: '*safety has come up as a key issue in a lot of recent discussions – physical safety, emotional safety, cultural safety*'. This highlights how the model's community infrastructure element helps to consistently identify enabling factors.

Uses by the council facilities manager demonstrate how the model's comprehensive framework helps overcome traditional departmental divisions. By highlighting both physical infrastructure and social process

elements, it enabled different council functions to see their specific contributions within a broader shared understanding of social connection.

Non-Profit Organisation Strategy

The third case demonstrates the model's value in organisational planning and evaluation. In a large humanitarian organisation, the model helped unite diverse programs under a common framework during a period of significant organisational change.

> 'At first, I felt like I'd missed the beginning of the story,' reflects a senior manager. 'There were all these different teams using terms like 'social connection' or 'social capital,' but there wasn't a shared understanding.'

The model's integration into their organisational outcomes framework and pilot programs demonstrates its practical utility:

> 'We've always known our programs make an impact,' the manager notes, 'but now we can demonstrate that impact with evidence—and use that foundation to keep building toward stronger connections across all our work.'

This organisational application reveals how the model can help unite diverse programs under a common model while maintaining their distinct approaches. The integration into evaluation frameworks particularly demonstrates how theoretical understanding can inform practical measurement of programs' impact.

Lessons from Practice

These practical applications of the model reveal insights about implementing social connection initiatives in real-world contexts. First, they demonstrate the value of frameworks that can effectively bridge theoretical understanding with practical action. In each case, the model's combination of visual elements and clear language helped practitioners explain complex ideas about social connection to diverse audiences, from community members to senior managers. This accessibility proved important for engaging stakeholders and maintaining momentum in initiatives.

Second, the cases highlight how the model's multi-level perspective helps practitioners address common challenges in social connection work. By explicitly addressing both individual and community-level factors, the model helps practitioners identify multiple intervention points and explain their interconnections. This proves valuable in complex organisational settings, where different teams or departments need to understand how their roles contribute to broader social connection goals.

Third, the model helps practitioners move beyond deficit-focused approaches. Instead of concentrating on preventing loneliness, practitioners can use the model to identify and build upon existing community assets and individual capabilities.

While the practice case studies focused primarily on physical and organisational contexts, today's social relationships increasingly span both online and offline environments. Understanding how people navigate this hybrid landscape of connection is significant for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers alike. The following section explains our approach to exploring the hybrid digital-physical nature of contemporary social connection.

Digital Dimensions of Social Connection

In examining contemporary social connection, the role of digital media demands particular attention. Rather than treating digital connection as separate from or inferior to face-to-face interaction, in our research, we understand the modes as interconnected within a 'digital social connection ecosystem' where online and offline interactions blend and complement each other (Savic et al., 2025). Research shows that people don't simply choose between online or offline interactions, but rather strategically combine different modes to maintain relationships (Hall et al., 2022). The centrality of digital connection is reflected in recent research where participants equated being online with presence in the world: '*if you weren't connected to the Internet, you were not alive*' (Ling et al., 2023).

Mirroring the circles of social connection in our model, existing research suggests digital connection also varies across relationship types. For maintaining close relationships, people use digital tools to enable '*ambient co-presence*'—a continuous, low-level awareness of others through regular digital contact (Madianou, 2016). For broader social networks and community interactions, digital platforms can create

connection opportunities that might not otherwise exist, particularly in contexts where physical meeting opportunities are limited (Savic et al., 2025). Distinct patterns are found by age group. Younger people often demonstrate sophisticated multi-platform approaches. In contrast, older adults typically focus on mastering specific platforms that meet their core connection needs (Savic et al., 2025). Cultural background influences digital connection practices, particularly for diaspora communities. Digital platforms enable simultaneous maintenance of transnational cultural connections and local community integration (Alinejad, 2019).

While digital connection offers valuable opportunities, its effectiveness depends on inter-related factors. The development of digital literacy is crucial—successful navigation of the digital social connection ecosystem requires not just technical skills, but a sophisticated understanding of platform norms and practices. This knowledge isn't equally distributed across populations. Access to digital connection opportunities remains uneven, shaped by economic circumstances and infrastructure availability (Ragnedda, 2020).

While patterns of digital use vary, all users face the common challenge of navigating an increasingly unstable digital landscape. Recent developments in social media platforms highlight dilemmas for digital social connection. The transformation of Twitter to X under Elon Musk's ownership, ongoing concerns about TikTok's data practices, and Facebook's struggles with content moderation demonstrate the inherent instability of commercial platforms that have become crucial social infrastructure (Savic et al., 2025). This 'enshittification' (Doctorow, 2023)—the degradation of platform functionality and trustworthiness in pursuit of profit—creates additional challenges for users trying to maintain their social connection.

As people continue to deal with the day-to-day concerns of using digital tools, they operate in a context where services are increasingly 'digital-first.' In such an environment, there is not a choice, but an implication that digital tools should be used for social connection. Yet, in our studies, we have found community practitioners often shy away from incorporating digital connection into their work. Rather than maintaining artificial distinctions between 'online' and 'offline' relationships, practitioners and policymakers need to recognise how people actively construct their social worlds using all available tools and opportunities. Understanding of digital connection as integral rather than separate from

broader social connection patterns reinforces the value of our interdisciplinary approach. As we move forward, this comprehensive perspective helps inform both theoretical understanding and practical responses to contemporary social connection challenges.

Moving Forward

This chapter has demonstrated why understanding and fostering social connection requires moving beyond the current crisis-focused narrative of loneliness. Our interdisciplinary model offers a framework that bridges individual and community perspectives while acknowledging the complexity of how social relationships develop and sustain over time. By integrating insights from multiple disciplines, the model provides a more complete understanding of social connection than previous single-discipline approaches. It provides a strengths-based framework that can guide practical action while maintaining theoretical rigour.

Building on this foundation, subsequent chapters will explore how this model explains contemporary experiences of social connection through empirical research conducted as part of the Activating Social Connection project. Chapter 2 presents a thematic analysis of residents' lived experiences in Australian urban fringe suburbs, illustrating how relationships and infrastructure operate within specific environments. Chapter 3 offers detailed personal narratives that exemplify individual journeys navigating social connection across physical and digital spaces, testing and refining our model in real-world contexts. These findings inform an enhanced version of the model presented in Chapter 4, which outlines implications for future research, policy, and practice.

By taking this comprehensive approach, we aim to advance both theoretical understanding and practical responses to the societal challenge of fostering social connection. The model provides a foundation for this work, offering a framework that can evolve with new insights while maintaining its core focus on supporting social connection across multiple levels and contexts.

References

Alberti, F. B. (2019). *A biography of loneliness: The history of an emotion*. Oxford University Press.

Alessandretti, L., Sapiezynski, P., Sekara, V., Lehmann, S., & Baronchelli, A. (2018). Evidence for a conserved quantity in human mobility. *Nature Human Behaviour, 2*(7), 485–491.

Alinejad, D. (2019). Careful co-presence: The transnational mediation of emotional intimacy. *Social Media + Society, 5*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119854222

American Psychiatric Association. (2024, January 30). *New APA poll: One in three Americans feels lonely every week.* https://www.psychiatry.org/news-room/news-releases/new-apa-poll-one-in-three-americans-feels-lonely-e

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (2017). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. In *Interpersonal development* (pp. 57–89). Routledge.

Banwell, K., & Kingham, S. (2023). Living well in your local neighbourhood: The value of bumping and gathering places. *Wellbeing, Space and Society, 4*, Article 100124.

Bess, K. D., & Doykos, B. (2014). Tied together: Building relational well-being and reducing social isolation through place-based parent education. *Journal of Community Psychology, 42*(3), 268–284.

Bild, E., & Pachana, N. A. (2022). Social prescribing: A narrative review of how community engagement can improve wellbeing in later life. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 32*(6), 1148–1215.

Bower, M., Kent, J., Patulny, R., Green, O., McGrath, L., Teesson, L., Jamalishahni, T., Sandison, H., & Rugel, E. (2023). The impact of the built environment on loneliness: A systematic review and narrative synthesis. *Health & Place, 79*, Article 102962.

Cacioppo, J. T., Fowler, J. H., & Christakis, N. A. (2009). Alone in the crowd: The structure and spread of loneliness in a large social network. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 97*(6), 977.

Cacioppo, J. T., Hawkley, L. C., Norman, G. J., & Berntson, G. G. (2011). Social isolation. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1231*(1), 17–22.

Cacioppo, S., Grippo, A. J., London, S., Goossens, L., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2015). Loneliness: Clinical import and interventions. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 10*(2), 238–249.

Davern, M., Gunn, L., Whitzman, C., Higgs, C., Giles-Corti, B., Simons, K., Villanueva, K., Mavoa, S., Roberts, R., & Badland, H. (2017). Using spatial measures to test a conceptual model of social infrastructure that supports health and wellbeing. *Cities & Health, 1*(2), 194–209.

De Risio, L., Pettorruso, M., Collevecchio, R., Collacchi, B., Boffa, M., Santorelli, M., Clerici, M., Martinotti, G., Zoratto, F., & Borgi, M. (2024a). Staying connected: An umbrella review of meta-analyses on the push-and-pull of social connection in depression. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 345*, 358–368.

De Risio, L., Pettorruso, M., D'Onofrio, A., Vicinelli, M. C., De Troia, C., Santorelli, M., Boffa, M., Politi, P., Martinotti, G., Zoratto, F., & Borgi, M. (2024b). Interventions to promote social connection and their effect on depression: An umbrella review. *European Psychiatry, 67*(S1), S226.

Di Perna, G., Radford, K., Barbery, G., & Fitzgerald, J. A. (2022). A systematic literature review of loneliness in community dwelling older adults. *Social Sciences, 12*(1), 21.

Doctorow, C. (2023, January 21). The 'enshittification' of TikTok: Or how, exactly, platforms die. *Wired*. https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-platforms-cory-doctorow/

Don, B. P., Gordon, A. M., & Berry Mendes, W. (2024). The good, the bad, and the variable: Examining stress and blood pressure responses to close relationships. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 15*(3), 288–298.

Doroud, N., Fossey, E., & Fortune, T. (2018). Place for being, doing, becoming and belonging: A meta-synthesis exploring the role of place in mental health recovery. *Health & Place, 52*, 110–120.

Dugan, A. (2024, July 9). Over 1 in 5 people worldwide feel lonely a lot. *Gallup*. https://news.gallup.com/poll/646718/people-worldwide-feel-lonely-lot.aspx

Dunbar, R. I. (1993). Coevolution of neocortical size, group size and language in humans. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 16*(4), 681–694.

Dunbar, R. I. (1998). The social brain hypothesis. *Evolutionary Anthropology: Issues, News, and Reviews, 6*(5), 178–190.

Dunbar, R. I. (2021). Religiosity and religious attendance as factors in wellbeing and social engagement. *Religion, Brain & Behavior, 11*(1), 17–26.

Dunbar, R. I. (2023). The origins and function of musical performance. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*, 1257390.

Dunbar, R. I., Arnaboldi, V., Conti, M., & Passarella, A. (2015). The structure of online social networks mirrors those in the offline world. *Social Networks, 43*, 39–47.

Dunbar, R. I., & Spoors, M. (1995). Social networks, support cliques, and kinship. *Human Nature, 6*, 273–290.

Gil Álvarez, M., Haugan, G., Larsson, H., Saarelainen, S. M., Duppen, D., & Dezutter, J. (2023). Mapping existential loneliness: A scoping review on existential loneliness/isolation conceptualizations and operationalizations. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678231193780

Goldman, N., Khanna, D., El Asmar, M. L., Qualter, P., & El-Osta, A. (2024). Addressing loneliness and social isolation in 52 countries: A scoping review of national policies. *BMC Public Health, 24*(1), 1207.

Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology, 78*, 1360–1380.

Hall, J. A., Dominguez, J., & Mihailova, T. (2023). Interpersonal media and face-to-face communication: Relationship with life satisfaction and loneliness. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 24*(1), 331–350.

Hall, J. A., Pennington, N., & Merolla, A. J. (2022). Which mediated social interactions satisfy the need to belong? *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 28*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmac026

Haski-Leventhal, D., & Bargal, D. (2008). The volunteer stages and transitions model: Organizational socialization of volunteers. *Human Relations, 61*(1), 67–102.

Haslam, S. A., Haslam, C., Cruwys, T., Sharman, L. S., Hayes, S., Walter, Z., Jetten, J., Steffens, N. K., Cardona, M., La Rue, C. J., & McNamara, N. (2024). Tackling loneliness together: A three-tier social identity framework for social prescribing. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 27*(5), 1128–1150.

Hill, R. A., & Dunbar, R. I. (2003). Social network size in humans. *Human Nature, 14*(1), 53–72.

Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Baker, M., Harris, T., & Stephenson, D. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: A meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 10*(2), 227–237.

Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., & Layton, J. B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: A meta-analytic review. *PLoS Medicine, 7*(7), Article e1000316.

Igami, K., Hosozawa, M., Ikeda, A., Bann, D., Shimizu, T., & Iso, H. (2023). Adolescent loneliness in 70 countries across Africa, America, and Asia: A comparison of prevalence and correlates. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 72*(6), 906–913.

Ling, K., Langlois, D., Preusse, H., Rheman, J. M., Parson, D., Kuballa, S., Simecek, M., Tsui, K. M., & Fraune, M. R. (2023). "If you weren't connected to the Internet, you were not alive": Experience of using social technology during COVID-19 in adults 50+. *Frontiers in Public Health, 11*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1177683

Lin, N. (2002). *Social capital: A theory of social structure and action*. Cambridge University Press.

MacCarron, P., Kaski, K., & Dunbar, R. (2016). Calling Dunbar's numbers. *Social Networks, 47*, 151–155.

Madianou, M. (2016). Ambient co-presence: Transnational family practices in polymedia environments. *Global Networks, 16*, 183–201. https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12105

Mahoney, J., Fleischer, L., Bottura, G., & Scrivens, K. (2024). Measuring social connectedness in OECD countries: A scoping review. *OECD Papers on Well-being and Inequalities* (28). OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/f758bd20-en

Mann, F., Wang, J., Pearce, E., Ma, R., Schlief, M., Lloyd-Evans, B., Ikhtabi, S., & Johnson, S. (2022). Loneliness and the onset of new mental health

problems in the general population. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, 57*(11), 2161–2178.

Masi, C. M., Chen, H. Y., Hawkley, L. C., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2011). A meta-analysis of interventions to reduce loneliness. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 15*(3), 219–266.

Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. Sage Publications.

OECD. (2024). *Measuring well-being and progress*. https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/measuring-well-being-and-progress.html

Office of the Surgeon General. (2023). *Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation: The US Surgeon General's Advisory on the health effects of social connection and community* (PMID: 37792968). US Dept. of Health & Human Services.

O'Shea, E. A. M., & Léime, Á. N. (2012). The impact of the Bealtaine arts programme on the quality of life, wellbeing and social interaction of older people in Ireland. *Ageing & Society, 32*(5), 851–872.

Pahl, R., & Spencer, L. (2010). *Family, friends and personal communities: Changing models-in-the-mind* (ISER Working Paper Series, No. 2010-01). University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research.

Perlman, D., & Peplau, L. A. (1981). Toward a social psychology of loneliness. *Personal Relationships, 3*, 31–56.

Putnam, R. D. (2015). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.

Ragnedda, M. (2020). *Enhancing digital equity: Connecting the digital underclass*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Sachs, A. L., Kolster, A., Wrigley, J., Papon, V., Opacin, N., Hill, N., Howarth, M., Rochau, U., Hidalgo, L., Casajuana, C., & Siebert, U. (2024). Connecting through nature: A systematic review of the effectiveness of nature-based social prescribing practices to combat loneliness. *Landscape and Urban Planning, 248*, Article 105071.

Savic, M., McCosker, A., & Farmer, J. (2025, in press). Navigating isolation: Mobilising a digital social connection ecosystem on the urban fringe. *Information, Communication & Society*.

Security.org. (2024). *Homeless statistics*. https://www.security.org/resources/homeless-statistics/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Department%20of,12%20percent%20increase%20over%202022

Staras, C. O., Wakefield, J. R., McDermott, D. T., & Jones, B. A. (2024). An evaluation of the role of social identity processes for enhancing health outcomes within UK-based social prescribing initiatives designed to increase social connection and reduce loneliness: A systematic review. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 34*(5), Article e2878.

Stewart-Brown, S. (2005). Interpersonal relationships and the origins of mental health. *Journal of Public Mental Health, 4*(1), 24–29.

Teasdale, S. (2016). Negotiating tensions: How do social enterprises in the homelessness field balance social and commercial considerations? In *Hybridising housing organisations* (pp. 110–128). Routledge.

Thoits, P. A. (2011). Mechanisms linking social ties and support to physical and mental health. *Journal of Health & Social Behaviour, 52*(2), 145–161.

Tracey, D., Gray, T., Manohar, N., Kingsley, J., Bailey, A., & Pettitt, P. (2023). Identifying key benefits and characteristics of community gardening for vulnerable populations: A systematic review. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, Article 5570089. https://doi.org/10.1155/2023/5570089

Tuan, Y.-F. (1977). *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. University of Minnesota Press.

Turner, J. C. (1975). Social comparison and social identity: Some prospects for intergroup behaviour. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 5*(1), 1–34.

UK Government. (2023). *Tackling loneliness annual report March 2023: The fourth year*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/loneliness-annual-report-the-fourth-year/tackling-loneliness-annual-report-march-2023-the-fourth-year

Umberson, D., & Karas Montez, J. (2010). Social relationships and health: A flashpoint for health policy. *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour, 51*(1_suppl), S54–S66.

Verhagen, J., Karg, A., Sivasubramaniam, D., Yeomans, C., De Cotta, T., & Farmer, J. (2025). *Measuring social connection: Social innovation Research Institute's Social Connection Measurement (SIRI-SCM) Toolkit*. Swinburne University of Technology. https://doi.org/10.25916/sut.28202168

Villalonga-Olives, E., & Kawachi, I. (2017). The dark side of social capital: A systematic review of the negative health effects of social capital. *Social Science & Medicine, 194*, 105–127.

Wallace, C., Farmer, J., White, C., & McCosker, A. (2020). Collaboration with community connectors to improve primary care access for hardly reached people: A case comparison of rural Ireland and Australia. *BMC Health Services Research, 20*, 1–13.

Weiss, R. S. (1973). *Loneliness: The experience of emotional and social isolation*. MIT Press.

World Health Organization. (2024a). *Commission on social connection*. https://www.who.int/groups/commission-on-social-connection

World Health Organization. (2024b, May 21). *New report flags major increase in sexually transmitted infections—Amidst challenges in HIV and hepatitis*. https://www.who.int/news/item/21-05-2024-new-report-flags-major-increase-in-sexually-transmitted-infections---amidst-challenges-in-hiv-and-hepatitis

Zavaleta, D., Samuel, K., & Mills, C. T. (2017). Measures of social isolation. *Social Indicators Research, 131*, 367–391.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

CHAPTER 2

Social Connection in Contemporary Life: A Case Study of Urban Fringe Suburb Residents

Abstract Urban fringe housing developments present distinct challenges for social connection, with diverse populations, long work commutes, and limited local meeting places potentially increasing residents' risk of isolation. This chapter presents findings from the Activating Social Connection Study (2022–25), analysing lengthy interviews with 44 residents from three rapidly growing Melbourne suburbs. Using our interdisciplinary social connection model, we examine how people build and maintain relationships across physical and digital spaces. The findings reveal the complex ways residents navigate social connection: managing time and emotional investments in relationships, using various community spaces and activities for connection, and progressing through different stages of establishing community ties. Digital platforms emerge as integral to modern social connection, offering new ways to maintain existing relationships and build new ones. While participants readily described their close relationships and community participation, they found it harder to identify broader support networks or articulate how they develop new connections. These findings demonstrate the model's value for understanding contemporary social connection experiences and highlighting aspects that might otherwise remain hidden from view.

Keywords Community spaces · Community connectors · Socialisation · Connection circles · Urban fringe · Place-based connection · Digital social ecosystem · Social relationships

© The Author(s) 2026

J. Farmer et al., *Beyond Loneliness*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-9509-6_2

Introduction

> You go from your hometown where you know everybody, your mum's five minutes round the corner, and then I was suddenly in Melbourne…where you can go three days straight and know no-one. (Emery, urban fringe suburb research participant)

Emery's experience reflects a common challenge in modern urban life: the struggle to build social relationships in new environments. This challenge is particularly acute in newly developing suburbs, where places are under construction, and people are from diverse backgrounds and are unknown to each other.

This chapter examines how people experience social connection in contemporary urban fringe suburbs, applying the three elements of an interdisciplinary model introduced in Chapter 1. We investigated whether this model could serve as an effective tool for understanding people's social connection experiences and influences upon them. If proven useful, the model could assist practitioners such as community developers, social prescribers, and urban planners in their work to assess and improve social connection.

In this chapter, first we explore research participants' individual social connection, examining their different types of relationships. We explore how people's social relationships exist across physical and digital spaces and examine participants' investments of time and emotion in their relationships. Second, we analyse community social connection infrastructure, including foundational attributes like safety and choice, spaces and places, activities, and people that support connection. Finally, we investigate the socialisation processes that participants experienced as they built and maintained their social networks.

Context of the Study

We applied the social connection model in work with residents and community organisations in three urban fringe suburbs of Melbourne as part of a large Australian Research Council-funded project 'Activating Social Connection' (2022–25). These suburbs are characterised by rapid population growth through new housing development on greenfield sites, with populations forecast to double over the next 20 years (.id, n.d).

While such suburban expansion is particularly characteristic of Australian state capital cities, similar development is seen across Asia, North America, and Europe (OECD/UN-HABITAT/UNOPS, 2021).

Growing urban fringe suburbs present distinct challenges for social connection. These areas often lack established community networks, with residents sharing little historical or cultural identity. Limited local employment opportunities result in many residents travelling significant distances to work (Nicholls et al., 2018). The centralisation of facilities like shops, schools, and community hubs, combined with inadequate public transport, means residents typically drive rather than walk to access services. This reduces opportunities for casual neighbourhood interactions that traditionally foster local social connections—such as chatting with neighbours while walking to local shops, meeting other parents during school drop-offs, or becoming familiar with local shopkeepers through regular visits. While digital platforms can help maintain existing relationships, they're less effective for building local and in-place connections. Housing affordability often drives people to these areas rather than choice (Roggenbuck, 2019), potentially affecting their commitment to establishing local connections. These factors suggest increased risk of social isolation in urban fringe developments, although evidence remains inconclusive (Bower et al., 2023).

Study Methods

After receiving ethics approval, we worked in three outer Melbourne council areas—one each in the West, North, and East of the city. Local councils had surveyed their residents about wellbeing following the COVID pandemic, with social isolation emerging as a significant concern. Thus the study of social connection resonated with council community development and social policy managers, who readily volunteered their areas to participate.

To find local resident participants, we partnered with local organisations that regularly work with residents: councils, humanitarian organisations, and mental health services. These partners helped us identify residents of various ages, cultural backgrounds, and employment circumstances. We sought to include those with different experiences of social connection—some well-connected in their community, others more isolated, and those who could share how they had built relationships since moving to the area.

Service organisations shared study information with residents, who could then contact us if interested in participating. Forty-four residents volunteered to participate. Table 2.1 summarises participant characteristics, with full details (anonymised) in Appendix 1. The sample included significant multicultural representation, with 57% speaking a language other than English at home. The sample reflects the diversity of Australian urban fringe suburb residents.

Each participant took part in two face-to-face interviews, typically one to two weeks apart. The interviews lasted up to two hours each, giving us three to four hours' conversation with each person. We chose this approach because social connection can be complex to discuss. The gap between interviews gave participants time to reflect, while the extended interview time allowed for longer conversations and helped build trust. When needed, we worked with interpreters to support people to express their experiences.

During interviews, we showed participants diagrams of the three elements of the social connection model (see Figs. 1.1–1.3 in Chapter 1)

Table 2.1 Participant characteristics

N = 44		
Council area n (% respondents rounded to whole numbers and to total 100%)		
Council area 1	**Council area 2**	**Council area 3**
15 (34%)	13 (30%)	16 (36%)
Sex n (% respondents)		
Women	**Men**	**Not disclosed**
35 (80%)	8 (18%)	1 (2%)
Age n (% respondents)		
Young (18–34 years)	**Mid-life (35–59 years)**	**Older (60 years & over)**
10 (22%)	15 (35%)	19 (43%)
Cultural background characteristics n (% respondents)		
Born outside Australia	**First language other than English**	
28 (63%)	25 (57%)	
Employment status n (% respondents)		
Employed full-time[1]	**Employed part-time[2]**	**Not working[3]**
7 (16%)	16 (36%)	21 (48%)

[1] In full-time employment, self-employment, care-giving, or student
[2] In part-time employment or volunteering
[3] Unemployed or retired

and explained model components. We encouraged people to talk freely about their experiences of social connection, letting them guide the conversation towards what mattered most to them. We also discussed how they used digital technology to connect with others. Participants received an AU$150 voucher for their time.

With participants' permission, we recorded all interviews. We used Otter.ai, an AI transcription software, to create initial transcripts, and then a team member reviewed each transcript against the original recording to ensure accuracy. To protect privacy, we changed names of people and places. Three researchers analysed the transcripts using established thematic analysis methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006), comparing data against the social connection model while remaining open to new insights. This analysis informs this chapter's content, with new themes covered in Chapter 4.

Findings

Study findings are organised below around the three elements of the social connection model (see explanation and Figs. 1.1–1.3 in Chapter 1). First, we explore participants' social connection circles, examining their different types of relationships. We also look at what participants said about inputs into their social relationships. Then, we examine how people engaged with aspects of the local environment to connect with others (community social connection infrastructure). Finally, we investigate the socialisation process—how people built and maintained their social relationships over time.

Individuals' Social Connection

The Individual Social Connection element of the model (see explanation and Fig. 1.1 in Chapter 1) highlights the different types of relationships people have, inputs needed to make and maintain relationships, and benefits attained as outcomes.

The model helped participants reflect on their different relationships and what these meant in their lives. Close relationships—like family members or very close friends—provide emotional support during challenging times. Social allies offer practical help and information, such as trusted friends who share advice or lend a helping hand. Group memberships, whether in sports teams, cultural organisations, or online

communities, create feelings of security and belonging. Regular encounters with familiar faces—from local shopkeepers to other dog walkers, or regular participants in online forums—contribute to feelings of acceptance in the wider community.

Maintaining connections requires investments of time, emotional closeness, and willingness to give as well as to receive support (willingness for reciprocity) (Hill & Dunbar, 2003). In return, people gain a range of positive outcomes (Thoits, 2011). This chapter focuses on participants' experiences of relationships and their inputs rather than outcomes.

Types of Social Relationships

Each participant demonstrated distinct patterns of social contacts across their circles of connection. Figure 2.1 compares the social connection circles of Helen, Maeve, Adi, and Asher to illustrate this diversity. See Appendix 1 for demographic information about these participants.

The figure shows how people's social connection circles comprised both face-to-face and online relationships. Patterns varied significantly based on individual circumstances. For example, Asher, a young immigrant from India with developing English language skills and awaiting visa approval, described limited social contacts—mentioning only her sister, boyfriend, community development workers who found her volunteering opportunities, and people she met while volunteering. Her situation illustrates how factors like language barriers and visa status can constrain opportunities for social connection.

Other immigrants—like Adi, an older Indian immigrant, and Helen, an immigrant from Macedonia in her 30s—described gradually expanding their social networks over their time living in the suburb. Maeve, a non-binary person in their 20s, maintained many relationships either fully or partially online, demonstrating how digital technologies are integral to making and maintaining social relationships.

Different Types of Social Contacts

Across the sample, participants most readily identified and differentiated their *closest relationships*—those providing emotional support and intimacy crucial for mental health and wellbeing (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Holt-Lunstad, 2021). These typically included family members, pets (often described as 'fur babies'), and friends considered 'closer than

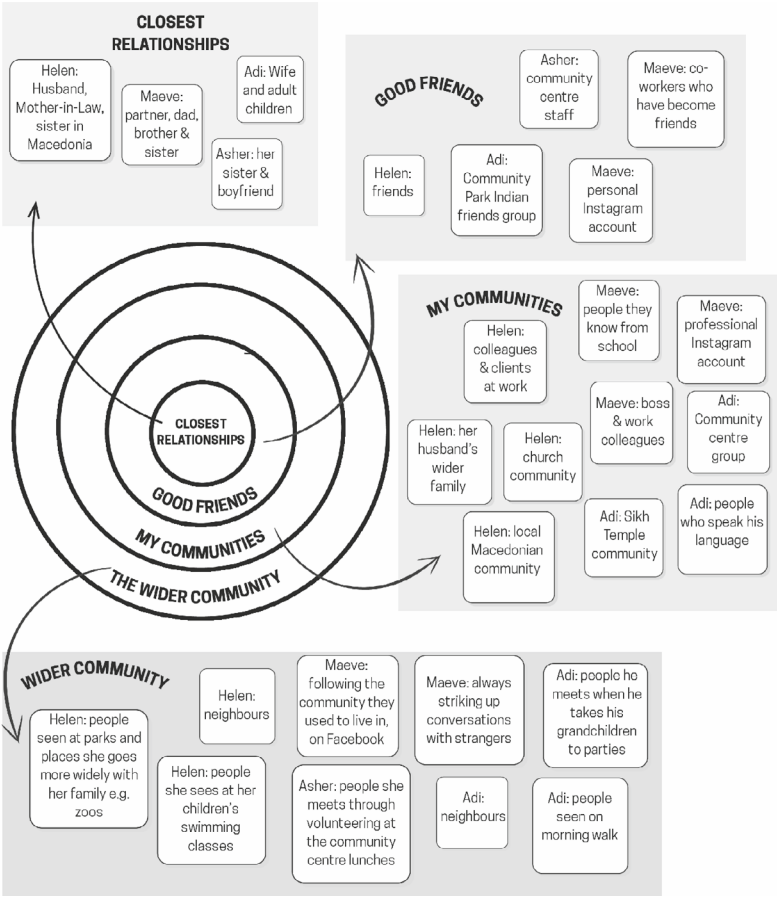

Fig. 2.1 Examples of social connection patterns

family.' Closest relationships were characterised by regular contact, shared personal information, and mutual emotional support.

We described *good friends* to participants as their social allies—that is, those who provide practical and informational support. We suggested to participants that, in turn, *they* also provide such resources to their good friends. However, distinguishing a type of social contact in this way proved surprisingly challenging for participants. While they did identify

people who helped them out, e.g. neighbours who collect mail during holidays or people they would turn to for information, participants tended to identify good friends as those with whom they had formed relationships over several years. They were those with whom relationships had lasted despite changing circumstances. People met their more lasting friends initially through work, education, shared interests, or community activities. They maintained the relationships through a mix of intermittent face-to-face meetings and digital communication.

Contacts in group memberships included co-workers and people known through current activities, sports, church, parents' groups, and shared cultural background. Connection with the wider community extended into digital spaces, where following local Facebook groups or participating in neighbourhood forums created different ways to access familiarity with neighbourhood matters. These wider community contacts typically related to specific places—café owners remembering regular orders, shop workers chatting about weather, familiar faces at parks or gyms, and neighbours encountered on walks.

For members of faith or cultural groups, social contacts often appeared across multiple circles and interaction modes. Avery, an immigrant from Hong Kong, described her church connections: four close friends with whom her family shares day trips; a church hiking group coordinated through WhatsApp; and feeling part of the wider church community who share her Hong Kong Cantonese language and culture through both in-person gatherings and online forums. This pattern shows how cultural and faith-based connections can create multiple pathways for social interaction, bridging different types of relationships and modes of communication.

Digital Social Connection Patterns

Digital tools were used varyingly to maintain relationships across the social connection circles, reflecting the varying functionality of digital platforms for maintaining types of relationships. For close relationships, participants used one-to-one communication tools like texting or video calls to create a sense of presence and intimacy despite physical distance. Group chats and platforms like WhatsApp or Facebook Groups helped maintain broader social networks and coordinate in-person activities, while more passive engagement through Instagram or public forums allowed people to feel connected to wider communities while managing

their energy and emotional capacity for interaction (Savic et al., 2023, 2025).

Younger participants like Cristina, Maeve, and Emery demonstrated particularly sophisticated ways of using multiple digital platforms. Their approach shows how technology enables new forms of relationship-building that transcend traditional constraints of time and place:

> I have a few friends from the UK and America… they're probably some of my best friends; the ones online are probably the people I'm closest with…I talk with them every day. I'll wake up and I'll have messages from them because they're in a different time zone. (Cristina)

These digital relationships introduce novel characteristics to how social connections form and function. For instance, Cristina's role in an online voice acting community, where she has thousands of followers across Twitter, Youtube, and TikTok, illustrates an emerging type of social relationship that doesn't fit traditional categories—one where boundaries between personal relationships and community engagement become fluid, and where connection can be simultaneously intimate and broad-reaching. These findings suggest that digital tools aren't simply replicating traditional forms of social connection online but are enabling new ways of building and maintaining relationships.

These emerging patterns of digital connection demonstrate how people create and navigate their own '*digital social connection ecosystem*' (Savic et al., 2025)—a complex web of online tools and platforms that supports different types of relationships and meets varying social needs.

Investing in Social Relationships

The individual social connection element of the model captures how maintaining social relationships requires investments of time, emotional closeness, and willingness to reciprocate (see Chapter 1, Fig. 1.1). Emotional closeness involves committing to the mental and personal work of maintaining relationships—like going out with friends even when emotionally vulnerable, staying positive during group activities even when tired, or persisting with friendships even when contacts are going through difficult times. These emotional investments, combined with practical time and the need to give as well as receive support, can be particularly challenging in certain circumstances.

Managing Time for Connection

In the study, participants who commuted outside their suburb for work described particular challenges. A typical day might involve a 90-minute commute each way, an eight-hour workday, and arriving home with limited energy for social activities. Many found it difficult to afford activities in their area during evenings and weekends—the only times they were available. Long hours and irregular shift work made it hard to establish routines of participating in regular activities at neighbourhood houses, libraries, or community centres. Even when activities were available and affordable, the mental and physical fatigue from work often made it difficult to summon the energy needed for social interaction.

Younger participants often prioritised work over social connection, generally out of financial necessity. Maeve describes their demanding schedule:

> [me and my housemates] live off ready meals, like Ubereats and stuff at the moment just because all three of us work and none of us want to cook by the end of the day … I'm doing five, possibly six days a week – on average, eight hours a day, so I don't get a lot of time. (Maeve)

Working long hours wasn't always just about paying rent. Cristina, who lives alone and works irregular shifts at MacDonalds, is saving to achieve her dream of '*having a paddock and owning a horse*.' Those working long hours often felt too exhausted in their free time to socialise. Their friends typically lived a long train, bus, or car journey away, making spontaneous meetups difficult. The combination of physical distance, transport costs, and limited energy created barriers to maintaining regular social connections.

Managing Emotional Investment

For participants like Cristina and Maeve, who grew up with digital technology, online relationships offered a way to manage social interactions while dealing with the mental health challenges they experience. Digital platforms allowed them to control the level and timing of their social interaction, making it easier to stay connected even during difficult periods. Both noted that digital connections required less emotional investment and were easier to navigate—particularly if the friendship

didn't develop as hoped, when online distance made it simpler to disengage. This flexibility of digital environments proved especially valuable for participants managing anxiety or depression, allowing them to maintain relationships while respecting their emotional and energy limits (Savic & McCosker, 2025).

Feelings of pressure from work and lack of energy sometimes transformed these young participants' feelings about social connection into a kind of idealised 'special event'—as Cristina explains, '*social connection - it is quality time… time that's not rushed… it's when you both actually set aside time to hang out for a quality amount of time*.' This shift from viewing social interaction as involving casual, everyday social interactions to scheduled 'quality time' perhaps reflects that opportunities for social interaction are rare and that people have come to have expectations that interactions should have special qualities.

Some participants discussed deciding to be proactive in nurturing new social relationships. Maeve, who describes themselves as '*always striking up conversations with strangers*,' recounts meeting a young woman on a late-night train journey home. Noticing the woman was scared, Maeve initiated conversation: '*we rode the train together and we ended up talking about our different walks of life and how similar we were*.'

Others described deliberate strategies for building relationships in new environments. Amal explains how, with each move to a new area, she actively sought out volunteering opportunities and casual jobs at local community centres and council offices. Emery, a young woman who describes herself as '*socially anxious*,' moved from another state to Melbourne for employment opportunities. She developed a routine of visiting the same local shops and cafes daily to build familiarity: '*I forced myself to go out… seeing the same faces, saying hello… it helped me feel less like a stranger*.'

Reciprocity

Few participants explicitly discussed ideas of reciprocity or 'resource exchange' in their relationships. Amal, an Iraqi immigrant in her 50s who describes herself as 'very sociable,' was notable in articulating this concept. For Amal, making connections is fundamental to thriving in a new environment. Pointing to the circles in the individual social connection diagram, she explains:

> You live in society, yeah…So you are here in the centre. You need to make connection with all the groups to make it easy in your life. Make your life easy. When you connect to them, you will make your life easy to get forward. (Amal)

Amal's experience illustrates how different types of social relationships work together to create support networks. She coordinates a local running group through WhatsApp, and another group bringing together people who share her cultural background. She speaks proudly of the date tree in her front garden—a cultural symbol that has sparked conversations with passing neighbours and helped her connect with other Middle Eastern residents in the area. Through these deliberate strategies of building connections—from close friendships to casual community involvement—she has created a support network that helps her navigate daily life while maintaining cultural ties.

Adrian also speaks about reciprocity when describing how his involvement in local committees and community events has created a network he can rely on: '*It gives me people I can turn to when I need help, and I can help others too. That's what community is about.*'

Summary: Individual Social Connection Patterns

The findings relating to individuals' social connection inform about participants' understanding of their relationships and their investments in these. The model helped participants think about the social contacts they have, and to articulate their experiences. From the findings, we can say:

- Participants readily described their social relationships using the circles of connection framing, though they found it most challenging to identify social allies—those contacts providing practical and informational support.
- Digital platforms are reshaping how people maintain and build relationships, particularly among younger participants. People create their own 'digital social connection ecosystem,' using different tools across their social circles to overcome time and distance constraints, and sometimes forming new types of relationships.

- Some institutions, particularly faith-based organisations and cultural communities, help people to be and to feel connected across multiple social connection circles.
- The investment of time and emotional inputs required to make and maintain social relationships is shaped by personal circumstances, including work patterns and mental health status.

Community Infrastructure for Social Connection

The second element of the social connection model explores how our living environment supports social interactions. This includes four interconnected components that build upon each other. See below and Chapter 1 (especially Fig. 1.2).

- *Foundations* are the basic attributes that make spaces and places welcoming. These include safety, accessibility, and a choice of places to go.
- *Spaces and Places* that help people connect include types of environments that are designed in ways that help social relationships to form.
- *Activities* that help people connect include those that inherently bring people together, like problem-solving activities (Farmer et al., 2020), learning new skills, or participating in synchronous activities such as dancing or singing (Dunbar, 2023).
- *People*, particularly community connectors (Wallace et al., 2020), play an important role in bringing local people together. Community connectors might hold formal roles like community development workers or be informal connectors like active community members who bring others into activities and groups.

While this element originally focused on geographical place-based community environments, our study suggests its relevance to digital spaces. Digital places and spaces also require foundational aspects like safety and accessibility, design and activities that help people to meet and interact, and people online who help others connect. We now examine how participants talked about aspects of their community environment that supported social connection.

Foundations for Social Connection

When discussing their local area, participants focused primarily on two foundational attributes—safety and attractiveness. By attractive, participants meant well-maintained spaces with good lighting, clean facilities, and welcoming design features like open sight lines and comfortable seating. These physical qualities were often mentioned together with safety, suggesting that well-designed and maintained places were also perceived as safe:

> It's nice, bright, lots of parks... there's heaps of young families in [the park] which is why I feel it's safe. (Emery)
> Everyone is polite, they say "good morning, hi" so I do feel safe around where we live. (Helen)
> I like the vibe of the [shopping centre] area, it's a good area, it's not dangerous or anything. (Cristina)

Libraries emerged as particularly important 'third spaces'—places that are neither home nor work where people can spend time without pressure to purchase anything (Oldenburg, 1997). Women participants especially valued libraries as safe, neutral spaces that offered both physical and digital resources for connection, from community noticeboards to free WiFi and computer access. This resonates with recent work on the valuable role of libraries for community social capital (Aldrich, 2023).

Places and Activities Supporting Connection

In the model, we separate spaces and places from activities that help people connect. However, participants tended to conflate buildings and open spaces with the activities that happened there. When asked about places they used for social connection, they would typically respond by describing '*classes at the leisure centre*' or '*going to the library*,' treating the location and activity as inherently linked.

Different places support social connection in various ways—from structured activities to casual familiarity with others, and from information sharing to multiple participation opportunities. Table 2.2 shows how different types of places in participants' local areas supported social connection. Some spaces, particularly community facilities and faith-based spaces, offer versatile opportunities for connection, while others excel at

specific functions like enabling casual familiarity or providing informal meeting places.

The effectiveness of different spaces for fostering the development of social relationships varied considerably. Faith-based spaces emerged as particularly successful, mentioned by about half of the participants. Their success stems from combining several key elements: regularity, structured activities; opportunities for both formal and informal interaction; multi-generational engagement; and clear pathways for deeper involvement through volunteering and leadership roles. As Avery noted about her church: '*It's not just Sunday service - we have WhatsApp groups for different activities, online prayer sessions, and social meetups. There's always something happening, and always someone to talk to.*'

Various places served as 'sociable spaces' for casual familiarity. These are environments where people can be among others without necessarily directly interacting (Latham & Layton, 2019). While community facilities offer structured activities, forming relationships often requires regular attendance. Helen describes this gradual process at swimming lessons: '*You see them, smile, maybe say hi and then sometimes you'll see that same person in the street, and you can smile because you already kind of know them.*'

Incidental or bumping places like cafes and walking routes helped build acquaintance gradually and are particularly significant for newcomers starting to build familiarity (Banwell & Kingham, 2023; Rajendran, 2016). As an example, Adi and his wife developed a daily walking ritual: '*We say hello to the same people we see each day, sometimes stop to chat. It becomes part of your day.*' Even brief exchanges, like a barista remembering a coffee order, contributed to feeling settled in the community.

Events and shopping centres, while creating community vibrancy, weren't often cited as places for making new relationships unless participants were involved in organising the events. Emery's experience of regularly attending a farmers market illustrates this: '*I might see someone from work there, but it's more about feeling part of something bigger - it gives you a sense of community rhythm.*' Issa notes that chain restaurants, often the only eating-out options in urban fringe areas, aren't designed for extended social interaction.

Workplaces provided important connection opportunities, even in high-turnover environments. Helen, a part-time beautician, values these interactions: '*I really enjoy going to work because of the conversations with other therapists and clients.*' Cristina describes her MacDonalds co-workers

Table 2.2 Social connection opportunities in local places

Type of place	*Primary social connection functions*	*Additional connection opportunities*
Community Facilities		
Community Centres	• Structured activities • Information hub • Community connector staff • Support services[1]	• Regular social groups • Family-friendly opportunities • Volunteering opportunities
Libraries	• Quiet sociable space • Information resources • Support services[1]	• Family-friendly opportunities • Study groups • Casual familiarity[2]
Leisure centres	• Exercise classes • Regular activities	• Social sports teams • Casual familiarity[2]
Commercial & Public Spaces		
Cafes	• Regular meeting spot • Casual familiarity[2]	• Family-friendly opportunities • Informal gathering/meeting space
Shopping centres	• Community hub • Casual familiarity[2] • Information access	• Family-friendly opportunities • Meeting place
Outdoor spaces		
Parks	• Family-friendly opportunities • Exercise groups	• Casual familiarity[2] • Community events
Walking routes	• Regular encounters • Casual familiarity[2]	• Exercise groups • Social interaction
Faith-based Spaces		
Churches, temples, mosques	• Regular worship • Multiple participation opportunities • Support services[1]	• Family-friendly opportunities • Cultural activities • Volunteering opportunities • Casual familiarity[2] • Information access
Events		

(continued)

Table 2.2 (continued)

Type of place	*Primary social connection functions*	*Additional connection opportunities*
Community events (annual and regular)	• Structured activities • Volunteering opportunities • Community building	• Family-friendly opportunities • Cultural exchange • Information sharing • Casual familiarity[2]
Workplaces		
Workplaces	• Daily interaction • Professional connections	• Support networks • Casual familiarity[2]

[1]Services to give help, e.g. advice about other services, access to a food-bank, or helpers
[2]Casual familiarity is about being able to be with other people, but not necessarily interact. It aligns with the idea of finding sociality in urban spaces (Latham & Layton, 2019)

as friends, though working different shifts means they rarely meet outside work.

These findings show how different places serve distinct but overlapping roles in supporting social connection. The most effective spaces combine several characteristics: enabling regular encounters, providing reasons for return visits, offering both structured and casual interaction opportunities, and feeling welcoming and safe. In rapidly growing suburbs, the availability and accessibility of spaces that foster connection vary considerably, affecting residents' opportunities for social connection. While digital platforms are used to access social contact, face-to-face interaction remains central to building local relationships.

People Who Help Others Connect

Some people actively help others to get involved and build social relationships. They might be in paid roles as social prescribers or community development officers, as volunteers, or be self-motivated community operators working to bring people together (Wallace et al., 2020). In our study, these community connectors operated across both physical and digital spaces, often bridging the two to strengthen local social interactions.

Participants mentioned different community connectors. Some were professionals, like community centre workers who helped newcomers

join groups or librarians who connected people to activities and classes. Others were proactive community members. Adrian, an older man who has lived locally over the longer-term, exemplifies this type of connector. He organises an annual multicultural festival and actively recruits other residents to join organising committees. He also runs a gardening group and moderates an online health support group, showing how community connectors increasingly use both face-to-face and digital means to bring people together.

Operating differently, Lydia, a retiree interested in improving her health while increasing her social interactions, started a local walking group. She creates flyers which she distributes while out in the neighbourhood, persisting despite sometimes receiving negative responses: '*I often get ignored, odd looks and rude responses, but I keep going because I know seniors especially need to get together, chat and exercise.*'

On the receiving end, other participants discussed the benefits of being approached or 'tapped on the shoulder' to participate. Some more reticent participants actually wished for more active outreach. As Brenda explains: '*I'm a bit of an introvert - introducing myself to others is difficult. I can push myself to do it, but it's good when others help.*' This desire for a 'friendly nudge' suggests that people often need what might be called 'permission to connect'—someone or something that legitimises their efforts to reach out to others. As we'll see in Chapter 3, this emerges as a recurring theme in some participants' journeys to find social connection.

Summary: Community Infrastructure for Social Connection

From the findings relating to community infrastructure, we can say:

- While research evidence highlights multiple attributes important for social connection, participants consistently emphasised two key qualities: safety and well-maintained, welcoming spaces.
- Places and activities work together to create social connection opportunities. The most effective examples, like faith-based organisations, combine regular structured activities, informal interaction opportunities, multi-generational engagement, and clear pathways for deeper involvement.
- Successful social spaces allow for different levels of engagement—from simply being present, to casual interactions, to more involved participation.

- The role of community connectors is vital, whether in professional roles or as active community members. These individuals use both physical and digital means to bring people together.
- Many participants appreciated being actively invited to connect, suggesting people often need a '*friendly nudge*' or implicit permission to initiate social connections.

The Socialisation Process

The third element of the social connection model captures how people progress through stages in a process of connecting with groups or communities (see Chapter 1, Fig. 1.3). According to the model—which is based on work of Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (2008), becoming socialised involves phases of: seeking to join (characterised by uncertainty and discomfort), getting to know (assessing fit with the group), and becoming part of the group (developing feelings of belonging).

In our study, participants most vividly remembered and discussed the 'seeking to join' stage—particularly the anxiety and uncertainty of trying to make friends or being new to a community. This pertained whether they were attempting to connect in person or online.

Seeking to Join

Even those who described themselves as very sociable—like Amal and Adi—recalled feeling lonely and unhappy when first moving to their current home. Digital communication tools and technologies offer new pathways for this initial phase, though they don't necessarily eliminate the emotional challenges of reaching out. Emery, who moved from another state capital city to Melbourne just before the pandemic, used Bumble BFF (a friendship-finding feature of the primarily dating app) to connect with potential local friends who shared her interests. Despite the app making it easier to find people nearby with similar interests, she still experienced anxiety about initiating contact:

> I sent her a message, which was scary. I've never used a dating app or talked to a stranger like that before. I focused on our shared interests, like The Office and our dogs, which gave me something to talk about. (Emery)

Her experience shows how digital tools can help in the search for new relationships and provide conversation starting points, but the emotional work of reaching out to strangers remains challenging. The isolation of lockdown during the COVID pandemic compounded Emery's challenges in making local connections, showing how external circumstances can affect the socialisation process and digital or physical modes of making connection.

Several participants talked about using symbolic cultural and language identifiers to make initial contacts. Adi describes how wearing his turban helped initiate conversations:

> so one day I was standing there looking at the timetable - when the bus is expected - somebody came and this [points to head] – we as people, wear turbans – so everybody knows that he's from India or Punjab. So, this is very beneficial. So, this man from India Chandigarh – he became my friend. (Adi)

Women discussed identifying each other through wearing a head-scarf, while others mentioned being approached after being overheard speaking Arabic, Macedonian, Cantonese, or other shared languages. These cultural signifiers created a sense of safety and permission to approach or be approached by others from similar backgrounds. This was particularly significant for people lacking confidence in social situations. Avery, for example, feels comfortable with people from her Hong Kong Cantonese culture but experiences anxiety about broader social interaction:

> I can't tell you how difficult it is for non-native speakers in this western culture…connecting with English speakers is hard. I understand, a culture is different and it's not enough to understand English. Like – they are making a joke, speaking about a popular singer. Oh yeah? We have no idea and it may be just casual talking. They use language we don't understand. (Avery)

Avery's experience shows how language barriers extend far beyond vocabulary and grammar. Her challenge isn't simply about speaking English—it's about understanding culturally embedded references, humour, and social cues that native speakers take for granted. These cultural aspects of language can make casual social interaction particularly challenging,

as they're often subtle and difficult to learn through formal language education.

Even seemingly small cultural signifiers could spark connection. Emery, for example, felt drawn to a colleague because: '*I liked her vibe. I noticed that she was cool. It was just a strong feeling. As well, she had a pride flag on her uniform. I was like "oh, cool flag".*'

Cross-cultural challenges were raised by several participants. For example, Avery (who is Hong Kong Cantonese) wonders how 'white people' would feel if she asked them to dinner at her house. And Adi expresses surprise at his experience of non-racist encounters, saying:

> [when I am out walking locally] … even the Australian people, white people I mean, they say hello to you, and with a smile. That is very good. People are very nice. (Adi)

Having a confident, outgoing personality and experience from previous moves makes a difference. Amal talks about how she needed to seek out opportunities to connect, and initiate invitations and group meetings. Her approach is shaped by certain advantages—her husband is a consultant physician at the local hospital, giving them access to an established network of medical colleagues and their families, as well as likely social status in the local community.

Getting to Know

The 'getting to know' phase involves navigating new relationships and assessing mutual fit. It's a subtle process of becoming comfortable with others and gradually increasing emotional involvement—testing whether shared interests or circumstances can develop into meaningful connections. This phase is often unconscious; people rarely think explicitly about how they move from initial contact to deeper connection. This 'hidden' nature of the process might explain why many people find it challenging to build new relationships, particularly in unfamiliar environments or across cultural differences.

While participants didn't directly discuss strategies for this phase, their stories revealed how they intuitively navigate it, particularly through digital spaces. Emery describes using social media as a low-stakes way to maintain awareness of potential connections:

> I follow people to keep up with what's happening in their lives, but I also engage with their posts by liking and commenting. And it's a good way to stay connected without having conversations.

The distance provided by digital platforms can sometimes make it easier to develop deeper connections. Ira explains how meeting someone through Twitter led to a meaningful friendship:

> I met her through a random group chat on Twitter. We bonded over our shared identity as [members of an ethnic group] and our love of Beyoncé. We are more open with each other because she doesn't know anyone else in my life. We seek advice from each other...

The physical spaces where these connections develop also play a role. Regular encounters in places like community centres, sports facilities, or local cafes can create a comfortable familiarity that supports the getting-to-know process.

Belonging and Establishment

This final phase occurs when a person develops a sense of being part of a group or community. It's characterised by feeling comfortable and established in social spaces and relationships, where participation becomes natural rather than requiring conscious effort.

The subset of participants who had lived in their area longer didn't explicitly discuss belonging. Instead, their sense of establishment showed through how they talked about local activities and groups. These longer-term residents were often the community connectors mentioned earlier—organising events, participating in committees, and volunteering in their neighbourhoods.

Amal, for instance, describes being part of multiple overlapping networks—both locally and within the wider Iraqi diaspora community. Her sense of belonging emerged through active involvement: volunteering at the community centre, working as a school crossing supervisor, and coordinating a local running group through WhatsApp. Adrian similarly built connections through his roles on the local council and Rotary club, creating what he calls '*a network that I can talk to, if I've got a problem. If anyone comes to me, I know who to connect them to – might be a councillor, might be a politician*.'

These examples suggest that belonging develops through active participation in community life, rather than simply through the passage of time. The digital dimension adds another layer to this establishment phase—participants described belonging to both physical and online communities, sometimes finding it easier to establish themselves in digital spaces first.

Summary: The Socialisation Process

From the findings relating to the socialisation process, we can say:

- The 'seeking to join' phase was most memorable for participants, likely because it involves anxiety and uncertainty that leaves a lasting impression.
- Cultural and identity markers often serve as important catalysts for initial connections, providing implicit permission to approach others.
- The 'getting to know' phase is largely unconscious or at least not remembered, with people intuitively navigating relationship development, sometimes through digital spaces which can offer lower-stakes ways to build connections.
- Belonging develops through active participation rather than just time spent in a community.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter examined how 44 urban fringe residents experience social connection, using our interdisciplinary model to structure the findings. The model helped surface aspects of social connection that often remain hidden in everyday experience. While participants readily discussed close relationships and community participation, they found it harder to identify their 'social allies' or articulate how they navigate the 'getting to know' phase of relationships. These complex and time-consuming hidden elements might be overlooked not only by individuals reflecting on their own experiences but also by practitioners and researchers studying social connection.

Using the model as a framework allowed us to capture data about these less visible aspects of social connection. However, examining social

connection thematically has limitations. Breaking down people's experiences into discrete categories risks losing sight of how social connection operates as a complex, interconnected process in people's lives. As an alternative, individual experiences revealed through personal narratives offers a different way to understand the complexity and unfolding and contextual nature of social connection.

To add this different way of exploring social connection, Chapter 3 takes a deep dive into the social connection stories of a subset of participants. Their detailed narratives reveal additional insights about why and how the social connection model might be valuable in research and practice. Chapter 4 then examines the broader implications of findings from both chapters, offering a refined version of the social connection model that incorporates these learnings and identifies priority areas for future practice, policy, and research.

References

.id (n.d.). *Find your community forecast*. Retrieved 15 April 2025 https://forecast.id.com.au

Aldrich, D. P. (2023). *How libraries (and other social infrastructure spaces) will save us: The critical role of social infrastructure in democratic resilience*. Available at SSRN 4639061.

Banwell, K., & Kingham, S. (2023). Living well in your local neighbourhood: The value of bumping and gathering places. *Wellbeing, Space and Society, 4*, Article 100124.

Bower, M., Kent, J., Patulny, R., Green, O., McGrath, L., Teesson, L., Jamal-ishahni, T., Sandison, H., & Rugel, E. (2023). The impact of the built environment on loneliness: A systematic review and narrative synthesis. *Health & Place, 79*, Article 102962.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.

Dunbar, R. I. (2023). The origins and function of musical performance. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*, 1257390.

Farmer, J., De Cotta, T., Kamstra, P., Brennan-Horley, C., & Munoz, S. A. (2020). Integration and segregation for social enterprise employees: A relational micro-geography. *Area, 52*(1), 176–186.

Feeney, B. C., & Collins, N. L. (2015). A new look at social support: A theoretical perspective on thriving through relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 19*(2), 113–147. https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868314544222

Haski-Leventhal, D., & Bargal, D. (2008). The volunteer stages and transitions model: Organizational socialization of volunteers. *Human Relations, 61*(1), 67–102.

Hill, R. A., & Dunbar, R. I. (2003). Social network size in humans. *Human Nature, 14*(1), 53–72.

Holt-Lunstad, J. (2021). The major health implications of social connection. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 30*(3), 251–259. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721421999630

Latham, A., & Layton, J. (2019). Social infrastructure and the public life of cities: Studying urban sociality and public spaces. *Geography Compass, 13*(7), Article e12444.

Nicholls, L., Phelan, K., & Maller, C. (2018). 'A fantasy to get employment around the area': Long commutes and resident health in an outer urban master-planned estate. *Urban Policy and Research, 36*(1), 48–62.

OECD/UN-HABITAT/UNOPS. (2021). *Global state of national urban policy 2021: Achieving sustainable development goals and delivering climate action*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/96eee083-en

Oldenburg, R. (1997). Our vanishing third places. *Planning Commissioners Journal, 25*(4), 6–10.

Rajendran, L. P. (2016). Understanding identity and belonging through incidental spaces. *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers-Urban Design and Planning, 169*(4), 165–174.

Roggenbuck, C. (2019). Diverse lived experiences of community in master-planned estates: A case study of Filipino and Indian migrants in Wyndham. *Urban Policy and Research*.

Savic, M., Farmer, J., Shaw, B., McCosker, A., & De Cotta, T. (2023). *Blurred boundaries: Social media and social connection in outer metropolitan suburbs*. https://doi.org/10.25916/j4dr-q754.

Savic, M., & McCosker, A. (2025, in press). Digital pathways to social connection and mental health on the urban fringe. In M. Savic, R. Patulny, & J. Farmer (Eds.), *Social connection in everyday spaces*. Bristol University Press.

Savic, M., McCosker, A., & Farmer, J. (2025, in press). Navigating isolation: Mobilising a digital social connection ecosystem on the urban fringe. *Information, Communication & Society*.

Thoits, P. A. (2011). Mechanisms linking social ties and support to physical and mental health. *Journal of Health & Social Behavior, 52*(2), 145–161.

Wallace, C., Farmer, J., White, C., & McCosker, A. (2020). Collaboration with community connectors to improve primary care access for hardly reached people: A case comparison of rural Ireland and Australia. *BMC Health Services Research, 20*, 1–13.

Wellman, B., & Wortley, S. (1990). Different strokes from different folks: Community ties and social support. *American Journal of Sociology, 96*(3), 558–588. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2781064

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

CHAPTER 3

Experiences of Connection and Isolation: Six Storied Stories

Abstract Social connection is complex, multi-faceted, and dynamic. While people's social connection can be examined through quantitative surveys or qualitative thematic analyses, the fluid nature of social connection experiences makes it particularly valuable to immerse ourselves in individual stories. This chapter provides a deep dive into the narratives of six participants from the Activating Social Connection study (2022–25). Using a 'storying stories' methodology, we crafted narratives from lengthy interview transcripts, focusing on aspects of people's life-long experiences that shaped their social connection and revealing connection 'journeys' that traverse recurring mental ill-health events, life transitions, and cultures. Viewing social connection as an unfolding process helps illustrate what people identify as significant to their connection experiences, how connection can be mediated through artefacts and landscapes, and how people make meaning of connection in their lives. While offering research insights, these stories can also serve as useful case studies for community practitioners to discuss with individuals or groups. Moreover, the six narratives might also provide powerful self-help resources for individual reading. They demonstrate that we are all navigating our personal paths in pursuit of the connection we want.

Keywords Lived experience · Storying stories · Place attachment · Migration · Mental health · Connection strategies · Cultural connection · Digital

© The Author(s) 2026

J. Farmer et al., *Beyond Loneliness*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-9509-6_3

Introduction

How do individuals build and maintain social connection in their daily lives? And how does this happen in newly developing suburban areas that may be particularly vulnerable to social isolation? Statistics can tell us about trends in loneliness, and thematic analysis can identify patterns in social relationships and how they are made. However, it's through personal stories that we can come to terms with lived experiences of social connection. Narratives showing how different individuals navigate their social world extend our theoretical understanding, while also providing case study resources that can be useful for individual reflections and community development practice. As Richmond (2002) argued, detailed personal accounts offer insights that reveal the complexity of social connection, and the diverse strategies people employ to build and maintain relationships.

In Chapter 1, we explained development of an interdisciplinary model of social connection. In Chapter 2, we analysed data from interviews with 44 residents of urban fringe suburbs as part of the Activating Social Connection project (2022–25). We presented findings thematically, structured by the three elements of the social connection model. The thematic analysis highlighted patterns in how people view their social relationships, aspects of their place-based community living environment that influence their social connection, and socialisation processes. While Chapter 2 gave an overview, this chapter goes deep. It presents six diverse narratives from Melbourne's suburban periphery, each offering a unique individual's reflections of how they create, maintain, and sometimes struggle with social connection.

These stories come from people of different ages, cultural backgrounds, and life circumstances (see Appendix 1 for demographic details of the participants). We meet Amanda, who cautiously balances social interaction with her mental health needs; Charlotte, who navigates connection across language barriers; Ira and Issa, who build bridges within their cultural communities; Levi, who creates support networks despite economic challenges; and Madeline, who helps others connect while seeking her own sense of belonging. Their experiences span recent migration, mental health challenges, community leadership, and significant life transitions. As Warne and McAndrew (2010) note, such diverse narratives help to understand both individual experiences and broader social patterns.

We wanted to provide concentrated narratives of individuals because we found these enlightening and moving. The stories help to understand that everyone struggles with their social interactions and, thus, as well as presenting rich streams of research data, they can be helpful resources for others. We assess that they can serve multiple purposes, including:

- Self-help as individuals can read and reflect that they are not alone in their ruminations, insecurities, and changing views about their own state of social connection;
- Therapeutic discussions between social prescribers and their clients to process challenges at arms-length from clients' own personal experiences;
- Community group engagements about the kinds of challenges that arise and how to deal with them; and
- Informing policy as the stories provide rich evidence of lived experiences.

This chapter starts with an explanation of the storying methodology and then presents six participants' stories with summaries of key insights. The chapter concludes with reflections on the role of the stories in understanding social connection.

Storying Methodology

People's stories of social connection are more than just a sequence of events. They reveal how individuals make sense of their experiences and their place in the world. Our approach to gathering and presenting people's narratives recognises this deeper meaning-making process, using what McCormack (2004) calls a storying stories methodology. This methodology allows understanding of connection and disconnection within the context of people's whole lives. As Richmond (2002) emphasises, this approach helps readers understand the complexity of lived experiences in ways that fragmented quotes cannot capture. Through these fuller stories, we can see how personal circumstances, cultural background, and social environment all influence how people experience and manage their social relationships.

Three to four hours of time were spent in conversation with each participant in our research study. This gave us a large amount of data

about each person. (For more details of the Activating Social Connection study methodology, see Chapter 2.) The in-depth interviews conducted gave people space to share their experiences of connection and disconnection in their own way, allowing them to explore memories, reflect on challenges, and describe their strategies for building and maintaining relationships. As Dibley (2011) found in her research, this kind of deep engagement helps researchers understand both what people say and why these experiences matter to them.

While all participants presented information about their social connection, we identified that some people presented striking narrative arcs that illustrated journeys to find social connection in changed circumstances, showed resilience in difficult situations, or illustrated particular experiences in a dislocating outer suburban context. As a research team, we had several discussions about whose stories we should include in this chapter and why. Ultimately, we identified six stories that exemplify diverse people's lives, and that collectively serve to show there is no one experience of isolation or connection.

Creating clear narratives from the lengthy transcripts required careful attention to detail. We three researchers immersed ourselves, independently, in each interview recording and transcript, noting prominent experiences and inflection points. While conversations naturally flow back and forth in time and between topics, we needed to create more structured narratives for readers. We reorganised events chronologically and removed conversation fillers while preserving each person's unique way of expressing themselves. We built the narratives through iterations of each of us working on the story, then team discussion, then further iteration. The goal was to pare the story back for conciseness while retaining the personality of the participant and conveying key elements of their story. A balance between readability and authenticity, as Warne and McAndrew (2010) note, is important for maintaining the integrity of personal stories.

We had consent from participants to present their data; however, following creation of the narratives, we undertook an additional step of participant engagement. We reached out to participants and shared the storied narratives we developed. At this point, participants gave feedback, advised about adjustments, and further anonymisation. This step helped us to understand how participants felt about the narratives generated. We were not able to hear back from all six participants due to their non-response, but the four who did reply appreciated the opportunity to

share their story more widely. This approach aligns with ethical research practices that prioritise participant agency and ongoing consent.

We present the stories below. Each illustrates a different pathway, dealing with social connection in Melbourne's suburban landscape. Through these experiences, we see how people navigate social connection across different life stages, cultural backgrounds, and personal circumstances, offering insights for practitioners, researchers, and community members alike. Each story begins with a brief introduction providing context, followed by the participant's story in their own words. Each story concludes with summary insights that draw broadly on the three elements of the social connection model presented in Chapter 1, about how relationships are structured, and influences upon them. All personal names and place names are anonymised.

Amanda's Story: Navigating Connection Through Personal Challenges

Amanda is a 42-year-old single mother living in Willow Creek, a suburb in Melbourne's outer northern suburbs, where she has made her home for over two decades. Recently diagnosed with bipolar disorder, she lives with her 16-year-old son Jake in a house she is paying off with a mortgage. Here is Amanda's story in her own words.

Place Attachment and Environmental Context

I'm definitely a person from the North. If I was to move, I'd probably move somewhere around this area. I wouldn't go anywhere else. I think it's just because we don't like change. We like to feel comfortable.

When I first moved here, my dad was alive at that time. He lived in Oakwood, and my brother lived in Oakwood, so I just wanted to be close to the family. They were much better prices back then, and it was a new estate. I felt comfortable around the area, just knowing places, knowing my own little bubble, my northern bubble.

The area has changed a lot over twenty years. The road, traffic, and everything has built up heaps—more estates, they've built up Meadowbrook and Pinehill. It's better in some ways—we've got the shopping centre and more opportunities now. But lately, I've noticed the council seems slack on maintaining the area. The parks have really high grass, and everything's overgrown.

I feel safe here, though, which is important. I felt uncomfortable when I had to go to the western suburbs for work. People often approached me for money or cigarettes, making me uneasy. Around here, I don't experience that—I can go to my local shops without being approached by strangers. It's different in the city or other suburbs where I don't feel as comfortable. Here, I know what to expect, the places, the people, and the routines. It's about feeling secure in your surroundings, knowing where you are and who's around.

Managing Connection strategically

Probably the best thing about living here is my connections with people. I can go to the cafe and they're like 'Hi Amanda', they know me. It's just that comfortable feeling of community. It's an estate where I live, so we have a Coles [supermarket] there. I'll try to support the local businesses, so I'll go to that pharmacy instead of going to Chemist Warehouse [chain pharmacy], and things like that. It's just good to know them, go into the milk bar, and they know you.

There's this Lebanese place in Aurora village called Oregano. It's just a little cafe—it doesn't even have seats inside, just an outside area. But there's this guy there, Ali, and he just makes the best coffee. I can't find any better. I've been going there since February last year, and I've watched his life change—he got married, had a baby, and now he's having another one. We talked about these things, and he showed me photos of his baby. It makes you feel part of something.

I've got a few neighbours I'm close with. Kaz has been here probably 17 years, and Kim lives across the road. We don't go inside each other's houses much, but we always stop to chat. When my son was younger, we did Halloween together for several years. Kim used to do family daycare and would look after my son and pick him up from the bus stop. That kind of support means a lot.

During COVID, when Kim got sick, I took over some things she might need. That's what neighbours do. If I needed someone to look after my pets or pick up a parcel, I could definitely ask Kim or Kaz. It's good to have that kind of connection.

Individual Capacity and Wellbeing

I've always been pretty friendly, and I know how to talk to people. But a while ago, when I was having a lot of mental health issues, I wasn't feeling any of that. I was avoiding places like the shopping centre because I didn't want people to ask me how I am. I'm so honest, I'll tell them I'm not good. I didn't want to have to keep repeating myself.

Getting my mental health diagnosis was confronting at first, but then something changed. Once I understood what was happening, things started making more sense. I started talking to friends who understood—some had family members with similar experiences. Their support helped me see it wasn't a bad thing, just part of who I am.

Since starting treatment, everyone around me says I've improved so much. They say I'm not so talkative—I still want to talk, but I'm not going a million miles an hour. I'm learning to pace myself better.

Evolving Social Circles

Being a single parent through all this hasn't been easy. My son is 16 now, and things are different. He's getting older—he's more like in his room than playing with me. We still do things together, but he's not a great outdoor person.

He goes to school in another suburb, taking the school bus. There's a bus stop near my house with a supervisor and bus driver. Now, he just leaves and comes on his own—he's six foot now, transitioning into a man. I'm glad he goes on the bus, so I don't have to go and deal with the mom drama at school, though when I go to the school for concerts or events, they're all like, "Oh, Amanda, how are you?" and we talk.

I lost some friends along the way. I had a friend, Bek, who got weirded out about me being unwell. She stopped contacting me, which still hurts a bit, but I'm better off. I've got to the point where if people don't want to be around me being sick, then I don't want to be around them. It's disheartening, but I understand—she's got a lot of things going on in her life.

My friend Jamie hadn't spoken to me for about three weeks, and when we talked, he said, "You were sounding good before, but you're sounding so much better." When you're getting that kind of feedback, it helps you keep going.

I still get anxiety, like I had a bit of anxiety coming here today, but I handle it differently now. When I missed a turn, I thought, "Ah, okay," and came around again. Before, something like that would have thrown me. The medication makes me sleep a lot, and some days, I wake up groggy, but I'm taking the time I need to make sure I'm doing well.

I used to be on the phone often, constantly wanting to ring people. Now I understand it was part of being hyped up. I'd be like, "What can I do? I'm just going to ring this person," and talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, changing subject after subject. But in the last four months or so, I've tried to be quiet, trying not to overshare. I think I'm getting older and finding myself more. I know myself better than I did before.

Establishing Connection Routines

I meet with a mental health peer support worker once a week at a cafe near my house. It's like catching up with a friend—relaxed but helping with my mental health. I've got other regular connections too, like my friend Dwayne. We reconnected by chance at the local coffee place, and now we catch up regularly.

Sometimes, I go for walks around the lake. Dwayne sometimes comes with his French bulldogs, and that always attracts people. These simple routines and chance encounters have become an important part of my life.

Social media has become a part of my life, but I try to keep it balanced. I've been on Facebook since about 2010, and it's my main thing. I have about 500 friends on there, but they're all people I know—if I don't know that face, I won't accept them. It helps me keep up with what's happening in people's lives. I'm not a big poster—I'll occasionally share something, like recently when my friend's French bulldogs had puppies.

We don't have internet at home—it's all on my phone. When my ex-partner was here, we had Netflix and other streaming services, but once I was by myself, I had to cut back on a lot of things. I had to be smart about it, switching to pre-paid mobile plans. My son doesn't have credit on his phone—I can't afford that. He uses Wi-Fi at school, and at home he hotspots off my phone when he needs to. I have to be careful about how much data we use, always monitoring and setting limits.

I used to be on the phone a lot, but now I'm more of a texter. With texting, you can think about the conversation instead of just talking non-stop. You can check on each other and see how everyone is, but you

don't have to reply straight away. Different friends need different kinds of connections. My older friend Margaret prefers phone calls, while others are happy with quick texts or Facebook updates. It's about finding the right balance with each person.

I tried online dating for a while, but I was pretty cautious about it. I'm a bit old school, and I found the whole experience uncomfortable—people wanting to move too fast or being inappropriate. Having to manage multiple conversations with strangers felt exhausting. I eventually deleted the app, realising I was content with the connections I already had in my life.

I've got enough people around me—I don't need to go around finding more friends. I use Facebook mostly to keep up with people I already know. Like my friend Jaya in New South Wales—we've known each other since I was 19, and despite the distance, we stay connected though messages and occasional visits. I've got other long-distance friendships too, like Penny in Canada—we might not talk often, but we're always there for the big moments in each other's lives.

Creating Place-Based Belonging

I moved here to be close to my dad. He lived basically at the end of the street in Oakwood. When he passed away—this January will be ten years—I brought all his succulents over from his garden. I've built them up along the fence line with blue stones. When you come out of my house, there's the garage, and I have a veranda I installed about eight years ago. Among these, there are little plants and hangers. I've got a lot of succulents from Dad's place—they help keep his memory alive here.

Every year, I try to attend Anzac Day ceremonies because it was an important thing when Dad was alive. I dress nicely and do that kind of thing. I enjoyed that tradition because my dad's dad was in the army, so he was in the war and everything. It's more about keeping the memories alive, and it also reminds me of Dad. I wasn't a big drinker, but I'd have a beer on Anzac Day because Dad liked his beer. It just makes me feel close to Dad.

Every time I go to the RSL, I know people there. My mom's cousin used to be the president, Narelle is the general manager now, and Nadi, her partner, volunteers a lot. There's always someone there I can talk to. Last year, I went to the Watsonia one because a friend's dad, who's the president there, was passing away from cancer. I felt it was important to

see him, and his face lit up when he saw me. Those connections through Dad's memory mean a lot to me.

The family has been complicated since Dad passed. There were issues with Dad's house and how it was handled that left me heartbroken. I've tried connecting with family over the years, but sometimes you have to accept when relationships aren't working and find belonging elsewhere.

I've built meaningful connections through small daily interactions—the local shopkeepers know my name, and these brief exchanges are more than just polite greetings. I feel grounded in this area where I've worked, lived, and built my life. It's comfortable knowing my way around, knowing the places and people.

I'm getting better at managing everything now. I've learned that it's okay to be selective about who I let into my life and how I choose to connect with them. This is my home, my community, and I'm finding my way. I might not have the family support I wish for, but I've built something meaningful here—a place where I belong, where I can be myself.

Story Insights

Amanda's story shows how people actively shape their social worlds, making conscious choices about relationships across their different social circles. From close relationships with her son and neighbours to wider community interactions at cafes and shops, she demonstrates how social connection requires both effort and strategy. Managing her mental health has taught Amanda valuable lessons about balancing relationships—knowing when to engage and when to step back, choosing texting over calls, and finding ways to connect that work for her circumstances, including navigating financial constraints.

Amanda's story reveals how belonging grows through everyday moments—a regular coffee order, chats at the bus stop—as well as through deeper associations to place and memory, particularly through her father's legacy in her garden and community traditions. Amanda has developed sustainable relationships by being selective and intentional, showing that social connection isn't necessarily about having many relationships, but about nurturing the right ones in the right ways. Her journey highlights how building satisfying social connection is influenced by recognising your own needs and limitations while remaining open to the small interactions that build community belonging.

Charlotte's Story: Cross-Cultural Connection and Place-Making

Charlotte, in her 50s, lives just outside Namaara, a small seaside settlement 60 kilometres from Melbourne CBD. Originally from Eastern Europe where she worked as a teacher, she moved to Australia fifteen years ago after marrying her husband, Henry. While she has formed connections with her husband's friends who share her cultural background, Charlotte continues to navigate the challenges of building deeper local ties in her adopted country, finding alternative ways to satisfy her intellectual and social needs through both in-person and digital connections.

Fundamental Connection Needs

When I think about social connection—how to describe it—well, I think it's just like the air you breathe. You can't live without it. Everyone needs to have a person that says 'good morning', or to relate with others through just a gesture or wave or whatever. It's a necessity.

I came to Australia because I married my husband. When I first moved here, I felt absolutely enchanted, though everything was strange. Nothing was the same as I was accustomed to. But I like nature, and nature walks and the moment I made a kind of mental map of the surroundings, I felt at home. Even now, when I'm walking along the beach where the pine trees grow; and the wind blows through there—and I feel home. If I close my eyes, I can still be at home in our forests, but then I open my eyes and I see the bay, and I know that I am here.

I walk through the bush daily—often with someone, quite often with my stepdaughter or with my friend Marina. I'll just say: 'do you want to come for a walk?' If she says yes, she comes. If she doesn't, I don't mind. But even if I do the walk with somebody, I still have to do it again. I have to walk again—alone. That's my ritual and it inspires me. It's a kind of walking meditation. I like it to be alone. I mean, I spend time with other people at work, but I have to have my solitary walk.

The walk is practical, but it has that ephemeral component. Back where I come from, during the dictatorship era, they eliminated the church permanently. They thought people wouldn't seek the transcendent, but we still did. In my hometown during that period, a vast percentage of people were walking in nature. That became their ritual. The state was

lying. The church wasn't functioning anymore. So, we went into nature because that gave us the nurturing and consolation that we needed.

Transition and Identity

At first, my husband invited me to spend three months just to see how I like it. I did all the touristy things and went into the city, but I didn't feel that connection. I needed to feel connection, to belong. Now I've been here for a while and it's becoming more and more interesting, and I love it more and more. It's just a deepening relationship. I think it's deepening because it's becoming more personal.

I didn't understand a word for three months. My husband took me to parties of his friends, and I didn't understand a word. Even now, when we go to Australian parties, I'm the silent one. I can't really participate in a bigger conversation because by the time I make up my response, the topic is already gone. If I have somebody to talk to one on one, that's fine.

I was a teacher before I came to Australia. That gives you status in your community and, with that status, you can do things. When I came here, I lost that part of my identity. I had to mourn that lost part of me. It made me feel alone. I think if I was closer to home, I would have fled back there. I had a moment when I told myself—'you just can't flee from every situation you don't like, you just have to stay here.' Instead, I told myself to be curious about the feelings: 'Why? Why don't you feel good? What is missing? What can you do?' I started delving into different things, like psychology, philosophy and all that—delving deeper than preparing yourself to do an exam. I took my questions with me on my walks. Being here is a great opportunity—If I'd stayed at home, I would only know being a teacher. But being a teacher is just one segment of your identity. Who else can you be to complete the whole circle?

Community Engagement Strategies

I don't think I am connected to the local community, because I can't even see a local community as such. I am removed from it. *I remove myself from it*. Every time there is a car boot sale [informal market], or the CFA [Community Fire Authority] organises something—you know, those kinds of local things, even the ones my friend Marina organises—clubs and walks—that's the only glimpses I get of the community. There

are individual people who I might know probably, and even say more than hello to, but I don't think I am connected. Because I'm not doing anything for the community. In order to be connected to the community, I think the community has to assign you some role or you find something to do for the community. And then you are part of it.

It's on purpose. I think it's just my personality and my age, as well. I think I am kind of done with the big things I've done with the community at home. That was so easy to do. Everybody knew everybody and I was known. And it was easy to make mistakes too because a network was supporting me. Whereas here, I don't have the confidence to do anything because I've not mastered the language. I'm kind of weird in their eyes, I assume. Maybe I'm not, but even if I'm thinking about doing something, then I have these thoughts: 'Oh, my God, what will they do, they will speak so rapidly. I won't understand.'

I am content, though. I think I am in a more introspective phase of my life. I'm fine with that, but I wasn't at the beginning. I remember lonely times. I remember being lonely because my husband worked long hours, and I missed those interactions with people which were so immediate at home. As soon as I stepped out, I met ten people. It wasn't positive all the time—sometimes I wouldn't want to meet them. They were there with their thoughts, and it wasn't always comfortable, but even that was better in comparison with that loneliness of the beginning here in Australia.

There were good things about leaving home and coming here, to tell you the truth. I was 40. So, maybe if I had been 20, it would have been a drama and traumatic because I left my well-known place. But I was 40 so I was ripe for change. I'm not saying that it wasn't difficult, but I thought—'that's my life now so I have to go on.'

People Who Are Tactfully Pushy

People here made it easy for me because they were so friendly. If I went out and I didn't even know who he was or who she was, they greeted me. They even asked me how I am—which was so odd because back home we only ask how you are if we are already friends. So, people made it easier for me.

I'm in a book club—there's 10 of us. We read a book each month and we gather and discuss the book at the community centre, or we go to each other's houses. I joined because someone referred me—a lady in my street. I used to walk with her, and she told me—'look, there's a book

club, do you want to join?' and I said, 'ah maybe not, my English is not good.' But I joined because one day she came with a piece of paper and there was a name and a phone number and she said, 'Call Nina. She's expecting you to call her at 4 o'clock.' She was very tactfully pushy. I was kind of obliged to go.

There was a multicultural group where I met lots of women from different cultures. That happened because I think one day I was looking at the noticeboard at the Community Centre and the manager came out and we started speaking and she was so friendly. She probably lured me in, I can't remember now.

I felt ambivalent about joining these activities. I thought I should join a club or a group, but I didn't want it to feel artificial. Joining them—it has to be organic. It has to be from the bottom up—that's vital when you are joining things because if it becomes artificial—I don't like artificial things. If I sense that, I'll run away.

On the other hand, there are things I really want to do, but I'm not doing them. One of them is—I would like to read with people, not too many people—four people—for example, a philosophy book from the beginning and to read it together. That would be a very interesting thing for me, but I don't feel like I could start it. The reading has to be transformative and I'm not sure where the others are around that would want to do this. I speak with a neighbour—we speak a little bit about philosophy, but I don't think she would be interested. It's hard to find people—it's easier online to find people, but I wouldn't want it online because that's not a real thing. Am I my worst enemy here? Because I'm not trying? If I threw out a word, probably I would meet two people and that would be enough for us to start.

Connection Circles and Cultural Bonds

I have some very good friends who are just like sisters to me. I found them here in Australia and it's just wonderful to have them. They are through my husband's friends—they were the partners of his friends, and I became friends with them. They live an hour or so away and we see each other regularly and go camping. We are at that stage that you don't have to show off, you don't have to be better than one another. We're just real with real questions, problems and joys and we are kind of the same age as well. These are all people like me who come originally from [my home country]—so we need just half words to understand each other.

And we do things that recreate our cultural heritage sort of things you know—we cook traditional dishes, and we speak our language and it's all like back home. Beyond these connections, I don't feel very close to the wider world except through my book club.

Looking at other friendships, I have a couple from my teenage years or even earlier than that, and they will remain my friends forever. We keep in touch by phone or Messenger. We speak maybe yearly or twice a year, but it's always like we've never been apart. It's a very strong thing. They are friends who were important in my becoming who I am now. I couldn't have been me today without them because we were there for each other. For a long, long time, when everything around us was just chaos, we were there for each other. We endured two decades of dictatorship with so many hardships and those bonds can't be undone. Never.

When I went back to my home village a couple of years ago, I was a stranger. I went home and I felt homesick in terms of the place, although with my friends there it was just as I said, we continued from where we left off. That is, in an instant we go back to speak about things in our lives or we can just be with each other. I feel at home with them, but not with the community anymore. I don't have a place there.

In terms of my friendship circles nowadays, it's like a kind of pick and choose. I feel that I have a choice among all kinds of people. It seems luxuriant to say, 'Oh, I'm picking her and her, because they make me feel good.' When you live in a village and when you have a broad spectrum of people around, then maybe you don't like everyone, but you have to tolerate them. That situation is difficult to navigate. However, I think this issue is at the heart of our society's problem with social connection. We go inside and shut our doors and become little atoms. That makes you feel you're not part of things. Church is a good example—if you go to a church, you find the whole community there, and you probably won't like half of people, but you still go there because of something else—because of something greater. I think it's necessary to have those social frictions. Without them, your world becomes a sterile island.

Finding Voice Online

Partly because of my challenges with language, I've experimented with online connection. I have this Twitter account. I made it because Margaret Crosby at ABC radio said you can follow us on Twitter. I made the Twitter account and said nothing for a year. I didn't know the rules,

I wasn't at home, couldn't find myself there. I use it because I have a podcast that I listen to regularly and they have a Twitter account, so I like and retweet them. Sometimes I have commented, but then I'm so anxious about my comments that I'm like—'oh, my God.' And I usually make three mistakes in one sentence, which makes me even more uncertain about it.

I'm on there, but I'm not commenting. Not vocalising. I'm the silent core. They even know I'm there—I feel they know. There are names for us—Lurkers. So, I'm one of the Lurkers. And the other name is—as in the ancient Greeks and their drama—the Chorus—those were the silent ones. So, I'm guilty of that.

I feel very connected to those people online. I feel much more connected to those in my virtual world than those I see in Australia. Maybe I don't look in the right places, but I just can't find them. It's odd because face-to-face connections are more real because they are embodied, and you share the same space and online it feels surreal—it's not real. However, if you're talking about a wider community that I feel I belong to—that's the online.

I'm also into this Jungian podcast. I've been listening to them for ages now and they are part of my week. I'm waiting. What's the next topic? And how will they talk about it? I am anticipating. I'm so engaged and involved without *them* probably even knowing it. The other day I participated in a Dream Summit and the people from my podcast had an hour presentation. That was the first time I saw them in person—like all three of them. And I cried for just the sheer fact that those people, those sages who are around me, weekly, were there and I could see them. I just cried. I know that's not a natural thing to cry about, but I cried nonetheless. I'm not connected with *them* personally, but *with what they're doing*—certainly. I spend time and I give my attention to that—so it must be meaningful to me if I'm doing that? It's interesting and it's also frightening. I wouldn't have anticipated this. I don't feel like I need to stop, but I need rules of how to use my online time.

Connection Through Landscape

When I came to Australia, everyone else was back in my home country—my brother and his family, and all my network, which was very extended, and very supporting, and very familiar. Here, our closest neighbours really made sure that I was alright. Other people in the village too will take the

time to stop and just make small talk. Then slowly I felt more confident. It's hard to pinpoint an exact moment when things started to feel ok.

And then, at one point, there came a big change for me. It was a big trip we did to the outback and that felt like a pilgrimage for me. From then on, I found other interests than before. I think that trip made me realise how we are alienated from the land. That's the same recurring theme. When I came here and felt alone, I realised we can be alienated from ourselves.

I think this journey was about 11 years ago. My husband and me, we drove from here up to Darwin and when we came back something had changed. That journey itself to the Kimberley and I clearly remember the Bungle Bungles. I can't even express it now, but the whole journey was something extraordinary. I can't even think why, but it was like some deep layers of my personality were addressed by all those ancient landscapes. And I think that was the watershed moment for me. Uluru and the Bungle Bungles. All the older landscapes—it cracks you open. It's like you're travelling in once upon a time. I think I made a connection with Australia through the landscapes more than through the people. I'm not diminishing the importance of people, but this is just my experience.

Story Insights

Charlotte's story shows how social relationships adapt and evolve when moving to a new country. Her experience spans all three elements of the social connection model (see Chapter 1)—from close cultural friendships providing emotional support, to wider community engagement through book clubs and local activities. Yet her story also reveals important dimensions our model perhaps insufficiently captures. Her profound connection to the Australian landscape, especially through daily walks and that transformative Outback journey, shows how interactions with place itself can foster belonging. While language barriers shaped her ability to connect, Charlotte found creative ways around them—forming deep bonds with others sharing her cultural background and carving out meaningful spaces online as a thoughtful 'lurker.'

Charlotte's approach to forging social connection is both strategic and intuitive—knowing when to step back and when to let those 'tactfully pushy' locals guide her into community life. Throughout her story, we see how connection requires constant navigation: the effort of crossing language barriers, the comfort of cultural familiarity, the peace of solitary

rituals, and the surprise of finding belonging in unexpected places. Charlotte's journey reminds us that social connection isn't just about being with others—it's about finding our own way to belong, even if that path looks different than we imagined.

Ira's Story: Building Community Through Culture and Place

Ira, a woman in her 20s, lives in Melbourne's outer western suburbs where she has spent most of her life since moving from East Africa as a child. Growing up in a culture that emphasises community, she maintains strong connections through her Eritrean heritage, youth activism, and various social circles. She seamlessly navigates both digital and physical spaces to build and maintain her relationships. Here is Ira's story in her own words.

Cultural Capital and Community Formation

I come from a society where—back home—it's very much community-oriented. It's not as individualistic as it is in the West. So, I think meaningful social connection for me is being able to surround yourself, or build relations with people that are like that, that emulate that kind of society. It's that 'it takes a village to raise a child', kind of mentality. I think I have that at this moment in time. If I move, I still need to stay here in this area because that's where all my meaningful social connections are.

I live in Arenst. I grew up in Arenst. I recently moved to another place, but it's still in Arenst. I've been in Australia most of my life. I was born in Ethiopia, I lived in Eritrea, I am Eritrean. Then I moved to Kenya, and then Australia. I've been in Arenst from the age of nine.

My dad came first—on his own. And then me and my sister and my mom came together. In Australia at that time, we had distant relatives. Now we have a lot more because when we came, we were able to bring my aunties and uncles and others afterwards. In our culture, whatever connections someone might have, you hold on to it—like, 'Oh, you're from the same village as me, right?' They become your family.

Place-Based Community Development

Pretty much almost all I know is really this area. The more I've grown up, the more I'm realising how good this area is. The fact that it's very diverse. When you go to other areas, or when you travel, you see this huge difference. There are many Eritreans and Ethiopians here. We have *injera*, which is a common food that's sold in the shopping centre here. I've managed to create a community for myself. I don't feel like an outsider. I belong here, I've found my space.

The community definitely changed over the time. A new library was built. I always used to go to the old one at the shopping mall. A library was important for people of my age. I would go there every day after high school. We would all just go there. That's how I built my community. You'd engage with people that were from different schools, and you'd meet so many new people because often you just know people that are in your school unless you participate in activities. The library is where I think everyone built their connections.

At one point I was at a school that was a Catholic school, private, all white. It wasn't diverse—the total opposite. But by the time I was 16, I'd gotten used to having that kind of environment. I was practical when I was there. I thought—I already have other friends, so I don't need to find them at school. I just created an environment for myself where I felt comfortable. Two girls were from *Ethiopia* and I just became friends with them, and we created our own little circle.

I was able to deal with the lack of diversity at school because I felt my parents had created social connections, and all of those people had kids, so I had my own community of friends already. The Eritreans that first came here, we have what we call *mahber*.[1] It's a sort of association that my parents participated in. In the '90s when the first Eritreans started arriving, there was this group of people who all either met in Sudan as refugees or they just happened to be on the same flight to Australia. When they arrived, six families became friends because of that. They all lived in the city housing projects and they all moved to Arenst. Because one of their relatives was my dad's friend, they all became friends, and all of them had kids around my age.

[1] In Tigrinya, the word mahber (ማሕበር) means 'group' or 'association.' It is commonly used to refer to a group of people who come together for a specific purpose, such as a community organisation, a club, or a team.

We still keep up with each other. The group did everybody's graduation ceremony the other day. Every school holiday, we still do something. Their goal is to continue even though all the kids are growing up. They live close, too, and that is important because I won't see you as often if you live far away.

Church is another place to connect. I went to a church group the other day for the first time in a long time. That church runs conferences every month. It's also cultural, because they have food, and they're very hospitable people. One of the good things is that it's run by young people. They speak to you in the same way you'd be talking about a different topic—not formal language. It's different when it's coming from somebody who seems within your age group—inclusive and conversational. It's a fulfilling experience because I'm learning something while feeling connected to the community.

Networks of Purpose

I also do the Young *Eritreans* youth organisation—it's not-for-profit. I've done volunteering and a lot of fundraising for *Eritreans* refugees or educational events, like galleries or documentary screenings, picnics, and just community gathering events. We founded it in 2019 and I was one of the founders.

I have many opportunities to meet new people and it's easy for me. My best friends are more multicultural and diverse—they come from different backgrounds, not necessarily from my background. I have friends from my teenage years, and then I've met people through work. I made two friends who were Ethiopians and through one of them, I met her friends online. We all came together because of our love for Beyonce—online—and then we became a real-life friendship circle. From the group of seven families I mentioned before, there are my social connections that my parents made, and friendships with their kids. I'm the one that connects all of these people together, but they also have their own multiple groups.

Sometimes connecting is just about entertainment. Some friends I might invite to a birthday party, for some, I'd do hobbies with them or book swaps. Some friends, we only talk about music; for some of them, it's just about one show or a specific trend on TikTok. A lot of it is media that connects me with them, but it could also be interest, like if we share the same political opinions.

Integrating Digital and Physical Connection

Social media helps maintain different levels of friendship. On Instagram, I have my closest friends who I share daily life with—we reply to each other's stories and posts, keeping up with what's happening in our lives. Then I have my private Instagram account with about 20–25 people—a mix of good friends and relatives. We might not be super close to everyone in this group, but we stay updated on each other's lives. So when we do meet in person, we already know what's been happening with each other.

Keeping friendships up is through shared interests and mutual support. Something might remind me about one of them; then I'll be, 'Oh, this is something you'd be interested in.' Or they might come to me for help. Social media connects us when we wouldn't see each other often in real life. I might ask them if they'd like to volunteer at a Young Eritreans event or about work-related stuff. If they need connections, they ask me too.

I use Instagram as well, but it's more for 'promotion' [laughs]. Most people, all my friends, have two accounts—one public where everybody can follow them and a private one just for friends. I use my public account to repost the Young Eritreans stuff or anything community-based. The private one is for selected friends where you can just say anything or tell all your friends the same information at once.

I don't use TikTok a lot. My friends will send me some things, and they'll participate in whatever popular thing is going on. I look at it occasionally to laugh, but it takes up too much battery life. Twitter is much easier, but TikTok requires you to do a lot more. It's not just commenting—if you want to create connections, you pretty much have to use the app all the time, make videos, really participate in things. Twitter is more suited to me. I'm not really a visual person, I'm more into reading stuff.

I mostly use Twitter because of the conversations and because you can create your own community. I use it for everything—Eritreans stuff, advocacy and regular things. When I'm watching a show, everyone's watching and commenting together through hashtags. Twitter is very popular among my groups. It's different because Twitter is more of an international community. I've met a lot of local people through that—especially with young Eritreans. I'll be, 'Oh, I follow you on Twitter', and then when we meet in real life, it's a shock—'Oh, you're from Melbourne.'

I have these people that live far away that I met on Twitter. Some of them are from America, we were all in a group chat for *habesha*[2]—Eritreans and Ethiopians. One of them became a close friend because we have similar opinions. Because of the distance and the fact that she doesn't know anybody in my life, we are more open with each other. We work in the same field and are part of the same online community. We've done video calls and messaging, but Twitter is how we mainly connect.

To keep in touch with the Eritrean community, we also have WhatsApp groups where people share helpful information. We have a younger one with over 50 people, some national ones and some Melbourne ones. It's mostly for networking—if we need help with grants or event sponsorship, we reach out through these groups. There's also a large Eritrea group chat on Instagram and Twitter that connects people from everywhere—the Caribbean, the UK, everywhere.

Young Eritreans started through Twitter too. A few of us met online first—'There's a meeting happening at this place.' We looked at Community Spaces and advertised for people to come. It's a space for discussion about what's going on in our country, and how we can help. We have outreach across Australia now. During 2020, we moved online, mainly using Instagram Live for events. We'd do game nights and quizzes, sometimes with 100 people joining. Now we're back to physical events like Cooking and Conversations, where we cook traditional food and discuss culture. It's about finding spaces with people who share a common culture, helping our community, and building connections.

Cultural Identity and Belonging

How do I feel about Eritrea? I mean, I still look at it as home, but I think it's maybe less of a home because everybody that makes it home has mostly left. But I still think of it as home. I have family there; my grandparents live there. The majority of my family have left the country so it's a huge exodus going on. That country is empty. If I could, I would like to do an extended period of time there where it's just working with the community because it's something I'm passionate about. I'm very passionate about my culture and country, but I don't think I could live

[2] Habesha is a term commonly used to refer to the people and cultures of the Horn of Africa region, particularly Ethiopia and Eritrea. It is often used to describe people of Ethiopian and Eritrean descent.

there permanently—because I feel like I've adapted to a pathway in this country.

Story Insights

Ira's social relationships span across multiple circles of relationships, as shown through her weaving of cultural bonds, local communities, and digital networks. Her story illustrates how building relationships demands considerable investments of time, effort, and passion—from organising community events to maintaining relationships across different social media platforms. She shows how connecting flourishes when people feel culturally safe and understood, creating these conditions for others through her community work.

While these aspects align with our model of social connection, Ira's experiences also raise important issues about contemporary ways to interact: how people move between digital and physical spaces, how different digital platforms serve different relationship functions, and the role of shared cultural understanding in fostering connection. Her story reveals the thoughtful work of social connection—choosing which relationships to prioritise and nurture, finding the right ways to maintain them, and creating spaces where others can build their own social connection.

Issa's Story: Cross-Cultural Connection and Community Building with Purpose

Meet Issa, a man in his early 30s living in Palawa, a growing suburb west of Melbourne. Having moved to Australia from Ethiopia at age 12, Issa has built his life around three core passions—soccer, fitness, and faith. He lives close to his siblings in an area that has become home to many first-generation immigrants, particularly from the Ethiopian community. While the suburb is still developing its identity, Issa has found his place through active involvement in community activities and sports. Here is Issa's story in his own words.

Place Identity and Cultural Navigation

Oh, moving to Australia and the southeastern suburbs was interesting. I had siblings, so it wasn't hard for me to get used to, but it was still very

different. At that age, it was just like you wanted to go and have friends to play with and fit in as quickly as possible. There were days when I felt like an outsider, fearing that I might never find my place in this new world. It wasn't that hard, but at the same time, wasn't an easy experience either.

What made things a lot easier was seeing people from different backgrounds. The area was a lot more settled. Some immigrants had been there for years, maybe even third generation. People had assimilated into the culture. In Palawa, it's different. It's more like first-generation immigrants, and people are still getting used to living in communities with other cultures and ethnicities. This made me feel uncertain as I navigated my identity between two worlds.

I knew the Palawa area pretty well before I moved in because my sister lived in a suburb close by, and I used to come to the West a fair bit. We also have friends who live in this area. Now that I've moved to this area, I don't remember the last time I went back to the southeast.

My parents are building a new house in Palawa. I was living in Thailand before COVID, playing soccer, and I came back when COVID started. So now, I'm just staying with my parents. They are building in Palawa, but we are temporarily staying in Roses Junction down the road. I don't really feel connected to the area itself, so I don't really bother making connections there.

Here in the West, I mostly deal with or interact with people who look like me, speak the same language, and are from the same background. Growing up in the Southeast, it was a place with people from a multitude of backgrounds. It's just a different experience—not bad, just different. Every time I go back to the southeast suburbs, it's like I'm going back to a different country. The culture is so different. I feel like it's very industrial here, especially in this part of the area, like Palawa down towards Marble Heights. There are not many things young people can enjoy, like when I was there.

When my siblings moved to Palawa, the rest of the family followed. Finding familiar faces in the community gave me comfort and a sense of belonging that I had longed for. Many of the community share my Ethiopian background, which made things easier. Palawa is also more affordable than the south-east suburbs, which is why so many new families and immigrants move here.

My routine is pretty straightforward—gym, soccer, church. These three places, and then just friends and family. These routines have become my anchor, grounding me in a community that feels increasingly like home.

Moving here made things a lot easier because most people I interact with are nearby. The community is predominantly Ethiopian, especially in these newly built areas.

I'm also happy to do things by myself. I like playing soccer on my own—I could be at the park or anywhere else, just doing these activities by myself. I also enjoy going to the library alone. Even if I have nothing specific to do, I appreciate being in that space, just doing my own thing. Since I moved to this area, I haven't felt the need to do much outside of it. For the first time, I felt truly at home, surrounded by people who understood my journey.

Purpose-Driven Connection-Building

Social connection for me means being part of a community where everyone works towards a fulfilling goal that meets most people's objectives. Of course, there are going to be compromises here and there, but I feel like a community or a group of people—your social circle—should be working on something bigger than just the individual. Coming together for a greater cause is what truly defines social connection for me.

What I like most is connecting with like-minded people who strive to achieve similar goals within the community. There's a sense of comfort in knowing that others share your aspirations and values. It hasn't been hard to make new connections because I find myself in those environments, and it becomes easier when you're surrounded by people who understand your journey.

These connections remind me of my roots and the importance of community in our culture. It's about more than just friendship; it's about building a support system where we uplift each other. In a world that can sometimes feel isolating, finding those who resonate with your experiences brings a sense of belonging that is deeply fulfilling.

Connection Through Shared Activities

Building on my experiences in Palawa, I've found that making connections is easy when I engage in activities I enjoy. Looking back, I realise that these activities serve as a bridge. They make the connections I form even more worthwhile because I'm doing something I love, and when others share that space with me, it creates an instant bond. It's like, "You like this too? Let's connect!".

At my first university and at work, studying aeronautical engineering, I didn't feel connected. I'd see my classmates passionately discussing planes while I was thinking about soccer and wondering when I could leave the lecture to play. I felt a real disconnect between my passions and what I was doing. Being surrounded by enthusiasm for something I couldn't relate to was frustrating, leaving me feeling isolated in a crowd. That's not the case with my current studies in Exercise Science at Vic Uni. There, I feel at home. You go there, and everyone kind of speaks the same language, using similar terminologies that resonate with me.

I spend a lot of time with my friends, but we mostly meet up to do activities rather than just hanging out at home. I play a lot of soccer, exercise, and stay fit. Many of my friends come from sports and church activities. When I engage in those activities, I genuinely enjoy meeting people, and that's how I form friendships.

On Saturday mornings, I run a Youth Fitness Program here in the Community Centre. There's a group of people who come every week from all over. They've become friends I see regularly. Many come because I've advertised it and they know me, but there are also newcomers who join the sessions. We have a WhatsApp group, and I've gotten to know them through this fitness group. Most participants are young, under 30, but I've had a few in their 40s who enjoy it too. Young people as young as 12 or 13 come, along with their parents. We try to make it fun with music playing in the background. People chat, and we make the fitness group challenging, so it's just as much social as it is about fitness. During breaks, we interact, and afterwards, we hang out in the kitchen area, which is open to everyone in the community. I think this program is significant. It's a vital way to get to know the demographic in the area and brings together a diverse group of people. It's a simple way to see, 'Okay, this is what my community looks like'.

Cultural Institutions and Networks

Church is a part of my life two or three times a week. We have a youth group that meets monthly, with meetings leading up to conferences. Our vision is to engage as many young Orthodox Christians as possible, helping disengaged youth feel part of their community. We also aim to preach the Word of God in English because there's often a disconnect when our church services are in a language that not everyone understands. Young people who grow up here in Australia can feel lost if they don't

understand the language, which can lead them to stray away from the church and their culture.

Last week, during the school holiday, we organised a day program for the kids. We played games and ended with a movie, making it a social event. With younger people, you often get one-word answers when you ask how they're doing. But when you engage them in activities, they communicate in different ways without needing to talk—it's beautiful to watch them open up. I organised this event with other young people at the church, dividing responsibilities among us—some took care of food, others organised games. Doing these kinds of things has brought us closer together, and now we're basically all close friends.

My online soccer community spans the globe. I have friends in North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia—South America might be the only place where I don't have connections. Most are from my time playing professionally, friends from Thailand and Ethiopia that I've stayed close with. I share soccer-related content, training videos and photos, to keep these connections alive across distances.

Different communities prefer different platforms—in Ethiopian communities here, we use Viber and Telegram [digital messaging platforms]. My friends in Ethiopia mostly use Telegram and Instagram, while friends in Thailand prefer WhatsApp and Instagram. Here, I rely on phone calls, text messages, and Instagram—it seems to be the common thread that connects us all. There are open chat rooms where you can comment and interact with others, like this one group with 2,800 members where you can ask questions and engage with people.

While we do things in person, these platforms help us stay connected, sending notices and organising meetups, especially for church groups. I'm in several church groups, but I've muted them due to too many notifications—it's a balancing act. I want to stay informed, but sometimes it feels like too much, and I don't always know what's happening. The algorithms can be funny sometimes—you find yourself drawn into content that doesn't interest you, and you wonder, 'How did I end up here?'.

I've gone on and off Instagram multiple times, taking breaks and returning months later. While I recognise these platforms help me stay connected, I often feel the need to filter through the noise and focus on what truly matters. Yet, the fear of losing touch with those I care about keeps me tethered to these platforms, even when they feel overwhelming.

Making It Work

If I could give my younger self advice, it would be to step out and immerse yourself in as many activities as possible. Don't hesitate—explore everything that piques your interest. In doing so, you'll discover what truly brings you joy. It's through these experiences that you'll make authentic connections with like-minded people who share your passions. These connections will likely be longer-lasting because they're built on shared interests and mutual enjoyment. When you engage in activities you love alongside others who feel the same, those relationships become meaningful and fulfilling. You're not just forming friendships; you're creating a support system that uplifts and enriches your life.

So, my advice is simple: get involved in as many things as possible. When you know what you love, you'll naturally attract those who share your values and passions, leading to connections that are both genuine and rewarding.

Story Insights

From close family ties and church youth groups to fitness programs and global soccer networks, Issa's story shows how different social relationships require different types of engagement and care. Through these varied activities, he has built connections that bridge his Ethiopian heritage and Australian life, showing how shared passions and purposeful activities naturally foster authentic relationships. His experience in Palawa demonstrates the vital role of social and environmental context—from affordable housing that enables community clustering to cultural institutions that provide connection frameworks.

Issa invests significant time and effort in maintaining social relationships, particularly through his youth programs. His story informs about navigating available digital and face-to-face modes for social connection and the significance of putting yourself forward to organise and lead, as well as to participate. His strategic management of digital platforms, the emergence of connection through shared activities rather than forced interaction, and his conscious choices about when and how to engage all point to socialisation as an active, evolving process. As both participant and community leader, Issa shows how social bonds flourish when people can authentically choose and shape their connections across physical, digital, and cultural spaces.

Levi's Story: Building Connection Through Daily Practices and Mutual Support

Levi, in his 60s, lives in a social housing complex in outer Melbourne. After experiencing homelessness and living in challenging conditions, he has found stability in his current home of five years. Despite facing ongoing mental health challenges, Levi has developed a rich network of social connections in his community. He maintains strong daily routines that keep him engaged with those around him. This is Levi's story in his own words.

Reflections on Connection and Self-Worth

What makes me feel connected to someone is that I can talk about anything with them. When you live in a place where that happens, where that can happen—it makes you feel worthy—wanted, it makes you feel wanted. You've got to feel wanted, I think. You've got to find some love inside yourself, for yourself, before you can love anyone else. That's what I have said to my children.

From Hard Times to a Place of Hope

I've been living here for five years now. Before that, I was living in a carpentry shop—yeh, a genuine place where carpenters are working, making things. It was fine enough, but there was no shower, so I had to go shower at a friend's place. I was living there for nearly five years too. I moved here because a friend hooked me up with an organisation and they got it for me. Because I was living in squalor pretty much. It was rat-infested, terrible, but I couldn't afford a private rental on my own at the time. I'd done a bit of work for this guy, so I lived at his carpenter shop. I did a bit of helping out, with repairs and things.

Then I moved here to this housing complex and, really, I couldn't believe it. The first day I was here, I had three showers in a row. I couldn't believe it—I was rapt. And it's affordable. I set foot here, and I fell instantly in love with it because—although they are 25 years old—they're still modern-looking. They've just gone through and painted them and put new carpet in them. They are really looking after us.

It's great living here, but food is expensive. Everything's gone up on the supermarket shelf. These days, I've been laying in bed a lot—just

keeping warm, because it's too expensive to keep the heater on. I have got the heater and my bed's right there near the heater. The heater blows straight out onto it.

It's taken me some time to realise that I've got a mental illness and that I can talk openly about it. My biggest problem is lack of sleep. Sometimes I feel really, almost desperate because I just can't sleep. I don't feel good about the medications from my GP—she reckons it'll help me sleep, but it doesn't. It just makes me more dreary and worn out. I think of myself as being a government experiment. I said to my doctor the other day, I don't like your pills. She says you should be on the pills. I say I don't like them—they make me drool, they make me sleep all day. She put down on my form—'smokes weed'. Yes. I do. Why not? Why hide the fact? I'm happy with it. I'm not overdoing it. I don't smoke a lot. I don't feel like I need to go to rehab because of it or anything like that.

Micro-Interactions and Community Building

I know a few people around here, and at one point, I was delivering parcels around here, so I got to know nearly everyone. The people around this area are good. It's a really friendly area. When I'm going around, I nod my head at anyone, and I see a bit of a nod of a head back. Even if they're different nationalities they do the same back. They don't say anything. They just nod their head. Everyone seems accepting of me here. I'm a bit of a ratbag; they've all seen the police come to my door here a couple of times, but still—everyone seems very accepting of me.

I like it better the longer I've been here because I know a few people around the place. I know the bloke who owns the bottle shop; I know the bloke who runs the pizza shop. I know them because I just got talking to them. I'm a friendly bloke. They come out and have a coffee and smoke with me while I'm at the front. It used to be my daily ritual. I'm not sure I feel I belong here—do we really feel like we belong anywhere? Do we? No—I feel accepted.

Connection-Making Strategies

I make new connections all the time. It's because I'm so easy to get along with, I know what to say to people, and I know how to start a conversation. When I meet a new person, I just always introduce myself. One way of starting the conversation—if someone's from another country or I

don't know where they're from, I just generally ask them, "what part of the world were your parents from?" That's how I might open up a conversation. That's a good way to start talking with someone from another culture. I think that's not offensive.

Another way to start chatting is—to ask people what they do. Whether they smoke? Whatever the question, I'll get to know them within five minutes. Generally, they feel comfortable talking back—otherwise, if they don't want to talk to me, I don't bother with them. But if someone stands there and wants to talk, I'll talk all day!

I don't need anybody new, at the moment. I've got enough people. Like I said, I don't think I'll ever get really sick again that I'd need to be put in hospital. I'd have to be really down and out—either drinking too much alcohol or getting on some unwanted drug. Those are the kinds of things that have driven me to the hospital before.

What helps is that I've got my friend network. I ring my friends and that helps me. You need good friends you can ring every day, someone you can talk to because you can't talk to these health people [GPs and formal health services], you can't open up to them—with your friends you can. You've got to make a bit of an effort to keep your friend network going. You have to be forgiving and accept people for who they are and how they are. Not everyone's perfect, we weren't made perfect. We're not computers… we're humans.

Social Connection Circles and Support Networks

My closest contact is probably Irene. She's a kiwi bird. I help her out with a bit of weed. I met her at the bottle shop. She's from the next suburb along. The last five years that I've lived here, I've known her. She comes and sees me once a week, stays and has a cuppa. We're friends—we're not together or anything. When she stays over, I sleep in the lounge room she's got my bedroom. People go, 'How can you do that?' I said I'm warm out here in the lounge room, I've got my telly, I don't mind. I don't want to see her out on the street. It is a sort of friendship. She's been good to me over the years, helped me a lot and cooked for me. We ring each other every day. I think that it's important to have friends.

With family, there's my stepdaughter—we chat on the phone every night. My son works very hard as a hotel manager, so we're not in touch as much as I'd like. I speak with my nephews and brother maybe once a month, and with my brother, every week.

I keep in touch with most friends by phone. One guy rings me nearly every day—he's a bit younger than me. I'd done a course with him for driving a bulldozer and Bobcat. I got him a job once when he was about to lose his unit, and he's felt indebted to me ever since. He gets a bit down, so we probably ring each other daily, sometimes twice. Then there's my mate Darren in Bairnsdale, who's a gardener, and Gus where I've got a boat, and a motorbike stored out in Kooweerup—we're in touch every week. I use my phone when I've got credit. When I buy credit, I ring everyone.

Daily Routines and Connection

Sometimes on weekends, friends come over for a barbecue at the electric barbecue outside the hall. Just me and a friend or a couple of other guys—we'll have a barbecue and a drink. There's Jim too—sometimes he has a bit of a drink, and I get worried, so I check on him. He's given me his security code because he trusts me. I check on him every day or couple of days; every time I go there, he goes, 'Checking, I'm still alive?' I say, 'Yep!'.

I go for a walk every morning up to the shop to get my 'healthy cigarettes'. I'm always walking around. I know quite a few people in the streets here. There's a girl I see walking her child in the pram, the Lollipop girls doing crossing duty—I tell them 'Keep your hands in your pockets' and 'Keep your hands warm!' Over at the footy oval, they give out food packages. They all know me down there; I can't remember them, but they know me. They're people who know what's going on in the community—who's going without. Even doing the road works, I talk to all those guys. I know all the girls down at Woollies too. I'm from the country originally so it feels natural to know the community. People from the country just connect differently—they have a bit of resilience.

I'd like to be more involved. I'd like to get involved with the SES [State Emergency Service] and do volunteer work because I think I'm still capable. I can use a chainsaw, I can sharpen a chainsaw, I can work on engines. Maybe not get out there and cut trees down but be back at the warehouse. If a chainsaw breaks down, I can work on it, or if a car gets a flat tyre, I can change the tyre and do the servicing on vehicles. I could offer a lot of mechanical experience still, so I'd like to find out how I could get involved. How could I get there—would they pick me up or something? That'd be really good for me; it would be like a bloke

shed [men's shed]. It would be good to get more connected with the community.

Navigating the Digital

I'm a bit of a homebody, watching telly, the 'idiot box', as I call it. And playing with my phone—googling things. That Google—I don't use it enough! I Google if I want something, like finding a phone number or wanting to know random facts. I'm reasonably confident using my phone for basic things, but I need to be shown a couple of times. I learn just by trial and error.

I think I signed myself into Facebook—worked that out myself. I feel quite safe on there. I know who to be friends with. Like, you get all these pretty girls come up, and you look at their profile, and there is nothing there—they're just scammers. I know not to bother with them, it doesn't matter how good they look. I might look at Facebook every day, mainly sharing posts about motorbikes—wind in your hair, full tank of fuel and a green light and you go…

If I need help with settings, I have Rosie. She takes care of all that. She's busy with her own stuff, can't always help me. It'd be something good over here if they could put on a class for all us phone dummies! I need someone to teach me basic stuff about emailing and phone banking. Like transferring money to someone's account—I don't trust myself with that.

I feel like I'm gonna get left behind. I can't even get a cheap hamburger now at Maccas because I haven't got an app. I feel like going in there and getting angry: 'Can't I just pay cash for a cheap hamburger?' 'No, you need the app.' I want to go back and live in a cave, catch a rabbit, and catch a fish!

To sign up for things online, I need a birth certificate. I haven't even got all that information. They know who I am, I've been on the computer long enough now. So, it would be great to have assistance with technology for us older people. That'd be a real big help, I think.

But, like I say, most of the time I just generally ring people. I feel so lost without my phone, I've taken it in for repair today, and I'm thinking 'Oh, my phone' because I can't call anyone! I've got that Wi-Fi connection, but I'm paying $67 a month and I hardly use it. I'm getting behind on the bill, I can't afford to pay it. I'd be better off just getting a Boost

Mobile for $20 and the Infinite calls—that'd be enough to do what I need.

Story Insights

From his daily interactions at local shops to his close friendship with Irene, Levi navigates social relationships across multiple social circles despite facing stigma around mental health and substance use. His daily investment of time and energy in these relationships, his morning walks and regular phone calls, demonstrates how maintaining social contacts requires ongoing effort. The stability of his housing and his community's acceptance, despite what he calls his 'ratbag' reputation, creates the foundation for these connections to flourish.

At the same time, Levi's experiences also reveal more nuanced and complex aspects of social connection. His distinction between feeling accepted rather than feeling belonging indicates there is more to feeling secure and welcome than just knowing people and community rhythms. His struggles with digital systems—from mobile apps to online services—highlight how technological barriers can deepen social exclusion and compound economic challenges. Throughout his story, we see how reciprocity matters, whether it's sharing skills, checking on neighbours, or supporting friends. His story reminds us that social connection isn't just about individual relationships but about having the means and opportunity to participate fully in community life.

Madeline's Story: Creating Connection Spaces and Community Building

Madeline is a retired pharmacist living in an eastern suburb. After years of corresponding with refugees detained on Nauru Island, she specifically chose to move close to where refugees were being resettled. Now in her 70s, she volunteers extensively, running Women's Friendship Groups and supporting refugee communities. Despite her role as an active community connector, moving to a new place later in life has presented its own challenges in building the social relationships she desires. This is Madeline's story in her own words:

Purpose-Driven Connections

We moved to Victoria because I wanted to work with women refugees and migrant women. I had already been working with the men when they were in Nauru. I had corresponded with over 100 people, and I had been working on lots of refugee issues. When they started to get visas, they moved to Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide, Melbourne and New Zealand. I thought Melbourne looked like the place [for me].

The first impression when we arrived is that you look up and down the street and you see nobody. Obviously, they do live here, but you don't see them. You know immediately that you have to make connections, but it might have to be something else that does not have to do with where you reside. You'll have to go out to find organisations and groups of people you have something in common with.

For me, a fulfilling social connection is a really good friendship. When I can just say everything, share everything with a friend, and listen to everything from them. The people that I really like the most are the ones you don't have to hold anything back from. You don't have to explain anything because you know their values. The connections I have built have definitely been through the activities that I've been doing because we have core beliefs, and we are people who work for the community.

I often think that if you can get a cup of tea in a person's hands, you're a winner. When I started doing this sort of thing, I had the symbol of a kitchen table as being a key thing. You know, men have the men's shed, their workbench, and their shed. Women have a kitchen table, so I thought, how can I make something kitchen table-ish? Nothing happens without thought, effort, and planning.

I had preexisting links in Crescent Creek with particular refugees because they had moved into the area, so when their families started to arrive, I immediately started supporting the women and children. There was also a lady who used to ring me from a retirement village, an elderly Chinese lady who felt so isolated that people just didn't comfortably include her. I realised that if I didn't function well getting to know this place, how is any new person going to function well coming from another country? That's how I started connecting and creating my Women's Friendship groups.

I've had a couple of requests from women in this area to start a Friendship Group, particularly where Indian migrants reside. I had been concerned after hearing about incidents of distress within the Indian

community—their patterns are different from other communities. Many of these women are high achievers; they're under a lot of pressure at home, at work, and socially. I know I need to create a safe place for these women to come and socialise with others.

A few years ago, in the City of Bayridge, people from Patterson North talked a lot about safety. There was a neighbourhood watch Facebook page where someone's photo was posted with warnings about suspicious behaviour—it turned out to be one of the group's founders! When you don't know your neighbours, you treat anything with suspicion.

Environmental Context and Connection Spaces

I like people to meet in public places, like libraries, parks or cafes. It depends on the group size, or sometimes we'll meet for a walk. When a new person comes along, and there's nearly always someone new each week, I introduce them to a couple of people. I make sure everyone is greeted nicely and fits into a conversation group or activity. Then I let them get on with it—we're so informal that you don't have to break into conversations.

Our morning at Cascades Gardens was really important. People discovered places they'd never visited despite living here for years. The space worked perfectly for everyone—children on the spectrum could enjoy the water features while other kids socialised. Because not everyone has the same language, having variety and space made it work for all.

The old local community centres were lovely because they had hangout places. I liked the neighbourhood houses of the 70s and 80s—they were homey with staff available, information brochures, and places to make tea and chat. The new centres are lovely spaces with kitchen facilities. They don't have to be enormous, but we need to be able to make cups of tea and provide refreshments.

Libraries are good for informal meetings—they're safe spaces with Wi-Fi connections. When new families I was helping moved here, the kids found their way to the library before their parents even knew where it was. The library made them feel welcome.

We just need places to meet people—you can't always invite them to your house, but you could suggest meeting at the neighbourhood centre for a cup of tea. You just need somewhere comfortable without much cost. It's funny how people put signs on their doors about not knocking,

and nobody does anymore—people always phone beforehand. That's why we need these impromptu spots.

I get referrals from agencies saying, 'These people need socialisation'. But we're over capacity, and too many people, especially with kids, can become stressful. The last thing I want is to prevent anybody from attending because that first step is very tentative. We can't put a cap on it or do appointments—that's just shutting people out.

Something very hard for me is informal chit-chat when I don't have the language, and it's not appropriate for interpreters when women want to speak privately. A few years back, we ran a girls' space which worked well because my Afghan colleague made families feel comfortable. We did all sorts of things the girls wouldn't normally be allowed to do—swimming, sports, beach days, city visits. But it stopped when funding ended.

Many established community groups seem exclusive. When I asked one group how new people could join, they said you have to be invited. They were all white, and their attitude was 'if others want groups, they've got their groups.' At first, I wondered why I was bothering when these groups seemed so vibrant, but then I realised they weren't addressing the idea of mixing people and making everyone comfortable together. But these established groups have no idea that you must change to bring other people in if they're not in, it's your fault.

Connection and Disconnection

I meet lots of people during the activities, but then we all go home to separate lives. I really like them while we're working together, but we have no point of connection after that. It is as much my fault as theirs, and you know, we just live in different worlds. Then again, I'm not inviting people around for dinner either, so I can't blame others.

I don't have the connections and friendships I've had in other places, and I think that's partly the suburban place, but also my age. I've had times when I've thought these friends are so good, but for one reason or another, I've moved away. My Buddhist friend said, 'Don't hold onto things, even people you love. You pass by at times, and when you reconnect, you just love it, and when you don't, it's ok.' It helps me think about it, but I still miss them—I really miss some of those good friends and the circle of friends.

When I was young having babies, we felt surrounded by friends. We knew all the kindergarten families, and our kids played at their houses.

Now, I look at young families, and I think they're not having the same experience because there are so many rules and restrictions. When we were with our kids at Kinder, all the moms stood at the front door waiting, we socialised, and our kids played together.

I started art classes for something creative and different. I also took up bridge, but the local group was very competitive and threatening, not nice and social. After COVID, I found a nicer social group, but it's too far away to continue. I'm just on the lookout for nice people and nice social things.

I joined the CWA [Country Women's Association] to interact with women about women's issues. The group is made up of more conservative, less energetic women—quite different from me. They have a different view of the world and politics. I don't talk about politics because I think they're the opposite of me, but we can be happy personally with each other.

I prefer meeting offline but online is important for immediate communication. Online meetings work better once you've met someone. If I haven't met people first, I'm more reticent—I don't want to expose myself online. When I'm talking to you in person, I'll tell you everything, but I don't do it online.

I chat with our kids, my sister and her family, and my husband's brother's family—that's ongoing but not day-to-day connection. When I moved to New South Wales without kids and working full-time, it took 12 months to find a lovely circle of friends.

During COVID, I made a WhatsApp group with neighbours—we'd chat over the backyard fence and stay connected. I also play online games, which I started when I was stressed with refugee issues. Online sudoku helped create a restful window when I was overwhelmed.

I examine my life all the time. I'm thinking I'll stay here because it's convenient—we've got medical services, the hospital is close, shopping nearby, and the park beside me to walk the dog. This street is comfortable; the house is secure. I'm happy that we can grow old here—I just have to start building social networks that can fit in with me.

Story Insights

Madeline's story captures the layered nature of social relationships—from intimate friendship groups to the broader work of community building. Her experiences show how social connection requires more than wanting

to make contact; it takes time, emotional labour, effort, and the right social infrastructure to flourish.

Madeline's story highlights the need for more nuanced thinking about supports for making social connection. Moving to a new neighbourhood later in life showed her how connection is forged slowly and subtly over time and is difficult to rapidly reproduce in the face of life transitions. The suburban environment itself, with its closed doors and scheduled lives, makes casual connections harder to build. While Madeline expertly creates connection opportunities for others, she faces her own isolation, showing how even those with social know-how can struggle with personal connection. Madeline's experiences give insights about how living environment and life stages affect connection opportunities.

Conclusion: Understanding Social Connection Through Six Stories

The six lived experience stories of social connection in this chapter show the unfolding process of making connection in an urban fringe context. At the same time, they show how people process their reflections on their own connectedness *while they speak*. While they will undoubtedly have thought about friends or loneliness or participation before, our interviews were an opportunity for people to focus on their assessment of their social connection status and how it formed. While each story is unique, together they give fascinating insights into how 'ordinary people' navigate the idea of social connection.

The stories reveal how social connection is both deeply personal and structurally shaped. Individual circumstances—from mental health to cultural background to life stage—influence what people want and the ways they approach making and maintaining relationships. These diverse personal journeys unfold within the broader shared environmental context of suburbs with centralised infrastructure, a social context of depleted cultural institutions, and a technological context promoting online services for many day-to-day transactions. The narratives demonstrate how people navigate their environment while also dealing with life transitions, socio-economic constraints, and cultural norms and obligations.

These stories challenge simplistic understandings of people's social connection status by revealing people's flexible assessments both of their state of being connected and sometimes about their own culpability for

this. They reveal the dilemma between wanting to be connected as an ideal, but the work this requires and the risk that new relationships will be overly demanding. This dilemma between being connected and the risk of problematic connection is exemplified by Amanda, who is wary of new relationships, and Charlotte, who understands community as consisting of those you find challenging as well as those you like.

The stories show the sophisticated ways people exercise agency in their social worlds. Participants demonstrate strategic approaches to connection, discussing making thoughtful choices about when, how, and with whom to connect. They navigate multiple spaces—physical, digital, and cultural—often developing nuanced strategies for each context. Whether people's connection strategies are truly this thought-out or rationalised after the fact is moot. Participants sometimes imply they are strategic about social connection, but sometimes it just happens instinctively or through other purposeful choices they make. This is perhaps exemplified by Issa saying he advises people just to do activities they like—from this, friends will follow.

All of the stories implicate the role of place. For Amanda, Ira, and Levi, they have become attached to the place over time. They feel belonging (or acceptance for Levi) in that they recognise themselves as part of a familiar environment. When they are elsewhere, things aren't quite right. This implies that people can grow to be part of any place, yet Issa and Madeline are counter to this. Issa didn't feel at home in the southeast and Madeline finds her living environment alien, though convenient. This suggests that people are looking for cues in the environment to attach to as a way to stimulate belonging. Charlotte confirms this beautifully—talking about how her feelings about Australian landscapes affected her spiritually. She found a connection to something ancient in the Outback, and to the pine forests of her home country, as she walks on an Australian beach. Relationships with place can happen with daily walking rituals or engagement with local buildings and parks.

Through storying stories of lived experiences of social connection, we have extended the understanding of social connection formed through thematic analysis in Chapter 2. This narrative approach reveals valuable information that helps to understand different people's states of social connection. It suggests social connection is influenced by a flow of events that involve people's past experiences and current capabilities, as well as how they make sense of their feelings in ways that are interwoven with

their living environment, the people around them, and the wider societal contexts they inhabit.

As well as constituting research evidence, the stories are also just for reading—perhaps not all in one go! We think they might help individuals to feel more comfortable with their own ruminations about isolation, and to take steps to move beyond loneliness. They comforted us. We think practitioners could use the stories therapeutically with individuals and for planning and activation exercises with communities and groups. Practitioners have previously asked us for such case studies.

In Chapter 4, we use evidence from the narratives, as well as from Chapter 2's thematic analysis, to refine the social connection model and to inform agendas for next steps, about social connection, for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers.

References

Dibley, L. (2011). Analysing narrative data using McCormack's Lenses. *Nurse Researcher, 18*(3), 13–19.

McCormack, C. (2004). Storying stories: A narrative approach to in-depth interview conversations. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 7*(3), 219–236. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570210166382

Richmond, H. J. (2002). Learners' Lives: A Narrative Analysis. *The Qualitative Report, 7*(3), 1–14.

Warne, T., & McAndrew, S. (2010). Re-searching for therapy: The ethics of using what we are skilled in. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing, 17*(6), 503–509.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

CHAPTER 4

Making Sense of Social Connection: Towards an Integrated Model for Research, Policy, and Practice

Abstract This chapter concludes an exploration of social connection in urban fringe suburbs, synthesising findings from the Australian Research Council-funded 'Activating Social Connection' project to present a refined interdisciplinary model of social connection. Building on previous chapters' thematic analysis and narrative accounts, we reveal how social connection requires considerable effort, operates across physical and digital spaces, and is shaped by both contextual factors and individual capabilities. The chapter introduces important new components to the conceptual model, including the role of context in shaping connection capabilities and individual factors that influence connection capacity. We demonstrate how viewing social connection through a relational lens helps understand it as a dynamic process rather than a fixed state. The chapter provides specific agendas for practice, policy, and research, emphasising the need to move beyond addressing loneliness to actively fostering connection opportunities. Our findings challenge the assumption that social connection should be effortless and natural, revealing instead how people actively navigate complex social landscapes using various strategies and tools. This work contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical approaches for building more connected, resilient communities where diverse pathways to meaningful connection are recognised and supported.

© The Author(s) 2026

J. Farmer et al., *Beyond Loneliness*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-9509-6_4

Keywords Social connection model · Digital social connection · Urban fringe · Social infrastructure · Connection capabilities · Relationality · Social labour · Resilience · Interdisciplinarity

Introduction

Social connection profoundly shapes our lives, influencing our well-being, opportunities, and sense of belonging. Throughout this book, we've explored how people navigate connection in Australia's urban fringe suburbs. These are areas of rapid population growth where new housing developments meet existing communities, and where changing demographics and limited infrastructure can put residents at risk of isolation. Drawing on the Activating Social Connection project (2022–25), we engaged with 44 residents through extended conversations about their experiences of connection, isolation, and loneliness. Chapter 1 introduced our interdisciplinary model for understanding social connection, developed with community service partners. Chapter 2 examined diverse residents' experiences in changing suburban environments, while Chapter 3 shared detailed personal stories for some of them. Now, in this final chapter, we synthesise these insights to present a refined version of our model and offer practical ways forward for communities, practitioners, and policymakers. Our goal moves beyond simply addressing loneliness to understanding how meaningful social connection can be actively fostered in contemporary environments.

Our work responds to growing international concern about loneliness and social isolation, particularly since the COVID pandemic. Drawing on research partnerships since 2017, we've worked with practitioners and communities to understand lived experiences of social connection and to develop practical, evidence-based tools for improving connectedness (Farmer et al., 2019; Karg et al., 2021; Knox et al., 2024; Soltani-Panah et al., 2018; Verhagen et al., 2025).

This chapter brings together the three main aims of the book: highlighting diverse knowledge sources valuable for understanding social connection; demonstrating how a strengths-based, interdisciplinary model illustrates connection experiences; and showing how empirical evidence about diverse lived experiences can inform practical responses. While grounded in research, this book speaks to multiple audiences.

Whether you're an individual seeking to understand your own connection journey, a community group working to foster local relationships, or an organisation developing connection initiatives, the model, analysis, and stories shared here offer resources for reflection and action.

Refining Our Understanding: New Insights and Model Development

Understanding social connection presents unique challenges. It's a complex concept made more intricate by the various ways different disciplines approach and describe it. Our original three-element model (see Chapter 1) brought together key components of social connection and its influences, showing there's more to fostering connection than simply addressing individual experiences of loneliness and isolation. Testing the model through urban fringe residents' lived experiences (see Chapters 2 and 3) provided valuable new evidence that helped us refine and strengthen it as a practical tool. This chapter presents these key insights and their influence on our enhanced model, which appears later in the chapter. Throughout the chapter, we draw on examples from our research participants, whose fuller stories appear in previous chapters (see Appendix 1 for demographic information about all study participants). Participants' names and place names have been anonymised.

Hidden in Plain Sight: Unseen Aspects of Social Connection

Findings of the Activating Social Connection project confirmed many components of our original model (see Chapter 1). However, they also highlighted aspects of social connection that participants rarely discussed explicitly—things that people experience instinctively rather than consciously acknowledge. Using the model in our research helped surface these less obvious but significant dynamics of connection. This insight proves valuable for practitioners and researchers, who might otherwise miss these aspects simply because they don't naturally emerge in conversations. The model serves as a reminder of all the moving parts that influence social connection, helping to surface important information in conversations with clients, research participants, or when developing policy.

The Invisible Mechanics of Connection: Relationships, Places, and Activities

Few participants readily discussed how relationships function and the different roles they might serve in their lives. Amal and Issa were among the rare participants who explicitly recognised that social relationships serve multiple purposes. Amal explained how you '*need to make connection*' with different groups to '*make your life easy,*' while Issa described social connection as '*building a support system where we uplift each other.*' This tendency to overlook the varied functions of relationships was also identified by sociologists Pahl and Spencer (2010) in their research on friendship. They found people rarely differentiated between the roles their various friends played in their lives, noting that only at significant life events like weddings and funerals do individuals typically observe their personal communities as a whole.

Similarly, our research participants seldom reflected on how physical spaces influence their connection opportunities. While they readily identified places where they meet others—community centres, cafes, shopping centres, and parks—they rarely discussed the features of these spaces that facilitate social interaction. In the original model, we identify 'bumping spaces' and meeting places (see Chapter 1, Fig. 1.2), but participants tend to simply name locations without identifying what makes these places effective for connection. This pattern extends to activities as well. While the model discusses how joint problem-solving or synchronous activities can stimulate relationship-building, participants typically just mention attending classes or events without reflecting on why these activities help create connections. This isn't surprising—people don't typically analyse the mechanics of how they meet and connect with others.

These 'invisible mechanics' of connection—how relationships function, how spaces facilitate interaction, and how activities build bonds—often operate below the level of conscious awareness. Yet understanding these mechanisms is crucial for practitioners and policymakers working to create environments and opportunities that foster meaningful connection.

The Work of Connection: Understanding Social Labour

Findings of the Activating Social Connection study highlighted a crucial but often overlooked aspect of social connection: it requires considerable effort. The social labour of relationships combines emotional labour

or mental activity and the work of arranging meetings and navigating the maintenance of different types of relationships (Hall & Davis, 2017). This combination of emotional and practical work becomes particularly visible in how people manage their digital connections. Multiple participants described making and maintaining relationships as tiring, involving constant negotiation, often with themselves, and various trade-offs. This social labour manifests in different ways:

- Self-negotiation about whether to invest time and energy in new relationships;
- Anxiety about reaching out and making offers to connect; and
- Strategic decisions about managing existing relationships.

As we saw in Chapter 3, participants like Amanda and Levi, both living with mental ill-health, made conscious decisions to limit new relationships, assessing that managing more connections might negatively impact their wellbeing. This self-negotiation work is particularly evident in the risky decision to reach out and connect with others. Brenda expresses a common sentiment that it would be better if other people made the first move, while Charlotte appreciated that someone *'pushed'* her to go to a local book group.

Some participants talked about making trade-offs between having 'ideal' social relationships and the practical need for social contact. Madeline, whose job involves helping migrants integrate, understands the theory of social relationships but still struggles to find the right 'fit' with others. She sometimes consciously suppresses aspects of her personality to fit in—such as avoiding political discussions at the Country Women's Association.

Interestingly, this work of relationship-building often conflicts with participants' expectations that relating should be effortless. Charlotte expresses 'ambivalence' about joining activities because making an effort seemed 'artificial.' She perceives that making relationships should be 'organic' and 'from the bottom up.'

Exposing Social Labour Through Use of Digital Tools

The ways people manage their social relationships using digital tools provide clear evidence of the social labour involved in maintaining

relationships (Hall & Davis, 2017). Some participants instinctively adopted digital tools to manage their social relationships more efficiently, attempting to minimise both emotional strain and practical effort while maintaining meaningful contact with friends and acquaintances. This digital management of relationships reveals the complexity of social labour and people's strategic approaches to handling it.

Close relationships demand substantial time and frequent interaction, but digital technologies enable contact to be scheduled at opportune moments throughout the day. Amanda, for example, says she responds to texts when she feels ready and prefers texting to phone calls because she can think about what she wants to say. Some participants used digital tools to filter their relationships into different categories, each demanding a different kind of effort. A wider public set of contacts is maintained through tools like Facebook Friends, using intermittent photo posting and 'public-facing' messages. This allows keeping up a presence without intensive engagement. Conversely, a more intimate set of social contacts is maintained through more frequent and personal types of posts, celebrating birthdays and significant events. Some more strategic digital users talked, additionally, of using their public-facing presence for work-related 'promotion' and political engagement.

However, digital efficiency comes with its own costs and complications. As Issa's experience with multiple Viber [a messaging app] community groups demonstrates, the constant connectivity can become overwhelming, leading to additional forms of social labour in managing information flow and social obligations (Hall & Davis, 2017). Some participants, like Charlotte, found creative ways to participate digitally while protecting their emotional energy—following YouTube channels and podcasts where they could feel connection while maintaining comfortable boundaries. This shows how digital tools, while helpful for managing social labour, require their own form of active management and skill development.

Expanding the Model: Including New Components

The work of the Activating Social Connection project involved exploring residents' lived experiences and discussions about findings with diverse practitioners working in urban fringe suburbs. From the study findings and discussions, we conclude there are two significant components missing from the original social connection model. We add these in the

revised model (see Fig. 4.1 later in this chapter). These additions reflect the complexity of how social connection works in practice: the role of context in shaping people's capabilities to connect, and individual factors that influence a person's capabilities to forge social connection. Below, we explain *context* and *individual factors* and their role in understanding different people's social connection.

Context in Shaping Connection Capabilities

Context shapes social connection in subtle but significant ways. While its influence wasn't always immediately apparent in conversations with residents, partly because they all share similar environments, contextual factors emerge as crucial shapers of connection opportunities (Williams, 2003). From our study, we identified four contextual dimensions:

- *Social Context*

People tend to move to urban fringe developments for housing affordability. Many commute out of the areas for work, and the suburbs often combine older rural settlements with in-fill, new greenfield developments (Nicholls et al., 2018; Roggenbuck, 2019). These distinctive characteristics were reflected in the lives of the residents interviewed. While some longer-term residents understood 'how the place works,' others described an ongoing 'journey' from initially feeling 'lost' to gradually building place attachment and security. This latter issue was captured in Levi's description of feelings of perhaps not belonging, but definitely 'acceptance.' Common feelings of disorientation on first moving to the area are understandable. The very nature of these developing suburbs means disconnection is inevitable—when almost everyone is new, social integration is actually unusual.

Paradoxically, though, the suburbs also represent safety for many residents. Refugees and economic migrants emphasised feeling secure moving around their neighbourhood. This duality emerged repeatedly in our discussions: suburbs that are simultaneously safe yet disorientating.

- *Built Environment*

The physical landscape of connection in the suburban context of our study revolves around libraries, community centres, leisure facilities, shopping areas, and parks. However, these amenities are typically centrally located and accessing them often requires car travel (Henderson, 2019). The centralisation of social spaces means residents must make conscious decisions to travel for connection opportunities. Local, incidental meeting places are scarce. A few participants mentioned parks, walking paths, and pavements as places where they regularly encounter the same people, helping build casual recognition and acquaintance. Religious gatherings often require travel or occur online, and aside from occasional mentions—like Ira finding food from her culture locally—there was little sense of distinct suburban character or identity. Different suburbs will have varying built environment conducive to social connection, the community social connection infrastructure element of the model helps to identify features of infrastructure that influence local people's capacity to connect.

- *Technological Context*

Our participants navigate a world where digital connection is deeply integrated into daily life. People are assumed to increasingly navigate services online and messaging apps and social media are fundamental to staying in touch (Kilpatrick et al., 2023). The technology landscape enables connection regardless of physical location, and its ubiquity promotes digital use. However, interactions with tools available in the technological context vary by age groups and cultural backgrounds (McCosker et al., 2025, in press). There is a gap between participants like Levi, who tends to phone people and is actively disconnected by the encroaching context of 'digital-first' services, and younger residents like Maeve and Cristina, who find it completely natural that their closest friendships are online. The technological context is simultaneously enabling and disabling for social relationships across the social connection circles, dependent on the digital capability of individual participants. This double-edged nature of digital connection—simultaneously enabling

and potentially overwhelming—suggests that digital dexterity is becoming crucial for social connection.

- *Institutional Context*

The availability of institutional structures influences people's capacity to access social relationships. By institutions, here we mean human structures that have rules and norms that shape social behaviour (Caporaso & Jupille, 2022). About half of our study participants belonged to communities formed around faith, ethnicity/cultural background, or sports. These communal institutions function as established '*social connection systems,*' providing ready-made pathways to access relationships.

Institutions confer several advantages. Members often grow up understanding the rituals and cultural standards, making connection more intuitive. Participation can transfer across countries, as demonstrated by Issa, in our study, who maintains connections through soccer across multiple continents. The institutions incorporate practices proven to foster connection—including synchronous activities like singing/chanting and praying, regular gatherings, and shared narratives (Bretherton & Dunbar, 2020; Dunbar, 2023). They offer flexible participation options across age groups and interests, including increasingly through social media and video conferences. Importantly, these institutions often provide support during life transitions and difficulties.

The societal decline in institutional membership, as highlighted by Putnam (2020) in 'Bowling Alone,' presents a growing challenge. Decreasing participation in churches, trade unions, and community organisations has created what Jennifer Gaffney (2020) terms '*political loneliness*'—a pervasive sense of disconnection from collective life. Without these institutional spaces for gathering and belonging, individuals may feel increasingly atomised, both invisible from, and not responsible to, their place-based communities (Gaffney, 2020).

These four contextual dimensions—social, built, technological, and institutional—don't operate in isolation but interact to create unique connection landscapes. Understanding these contextual factors helps explain why simply encouraging people to 'get out and connect' isn't enough—the environment itself must support connection opportunities.

This interplay between context and connection becomes even more significant when we consider how individual circumstances affect people's ability to navigate these environments.

Individual Factors Influencing Capability for Connection

Beyond contextual influences, our study revealed several personal factors that significantly affect an individual's capability to connect. These factors create different starting points and pathways for social connection, highlighting why one-size-fits-all approaches to fostering connection often fall short:

- *Language and Culture*

Moving to a different country presents distinct challenges, especially for those living away from others who share their cultural background. Barriers aren't simply about English language proficiency, but also about understanding cultural nuances in everyday conversation. Avery and Charlotte's experiences, as Hong Kong Cantonese and Eastern European individuals respectively, demonstrate how cultural and linguistic dissonance can increase risk for social isolation, particularly when experienced without the support of a wider cultural community.

- *Health Status*

An individual's health status significantly influences their capability to make and maintain relationships (Lewis et al., 2024). Mental health emerged as particularly significant in our study; Maeve describes withdrawing from friends when she feels her mental health might make her '*a burden*.' Physical health barriers can also create cascading effects on connection opportunities; for example, having to find transport to places for connection can give rise to anxiety and decisions to stay home.

- *Length of Time in the Area*

Living longer in a neighbourhood means knowing '*how the community works*,' having familiarity with local people and activities, and better

access to resources and support networks (Ellery et al., 2021). Participants like Adrian and Noah demonstrated how long-term residence can build diverse relationships through bridging and linking social capital (Moore & Kawachi, 2017). However, time alone doesn't guarantee beneficial connections—Amanda, despite being a life-long resident, primarily maintains bonding connections within similar social circles.

- *Digital Capabilities*

Linked to 'technological context' above, participants make varied use of digital technologies partly due to economic means and partly to skills constraints. Levi suffers both of these challenges. He struggles to maintain phone services due to cost constraints and doesn't know how to use email. This contrasts with other 'agile' users—like Ira in our study—who can match different digital tools to specific connection needs (McCosker et al., 2025 in press; Hall & Davis, 2017).

- *Expectations and Rumination*

How people think about and evaluate social connection significantly affects their connection experiences. Some participants engage in extensive self-comparison and rumination, while others maintain more practical perspectives. Charlotte's reflection that '*I am removed from it. I remove myself from it*' demonstrates how self-perception can influence connection behaviour.

- *Connection Strategies*

Participants demonstrated varying abilities to develop and implement strategies for building connection. Some, like Amal and Emery, actively created opportunities for connection through volunteering or regular cafe visits. Others, like Brenda, preferred to wait for others to initiate contact, highlighting how different approaches to connection-building can lead to very different outcomes.

These individual factors—from language and cultural navigation to digital capabilities and personal strategies—interact with broader contextual influences to shape each person's unique experience of social connection. Understanding these variations helps explain why some people thrive in environments where others struggle to connect, and why supporting social connection requires flexible, personalised approaches that account for both individual circumstances and environmental contexts. These insights led us to develop the more comprehensive version of our social connection model presented in the next section.

The New Social Connection Model

Our research findings directly informed the refinement of the social connection model. The new version is presented in Fig. 4.1 and incorporates several key developments:

- Incorporates contextual and individual factors that influence connection capabilities;

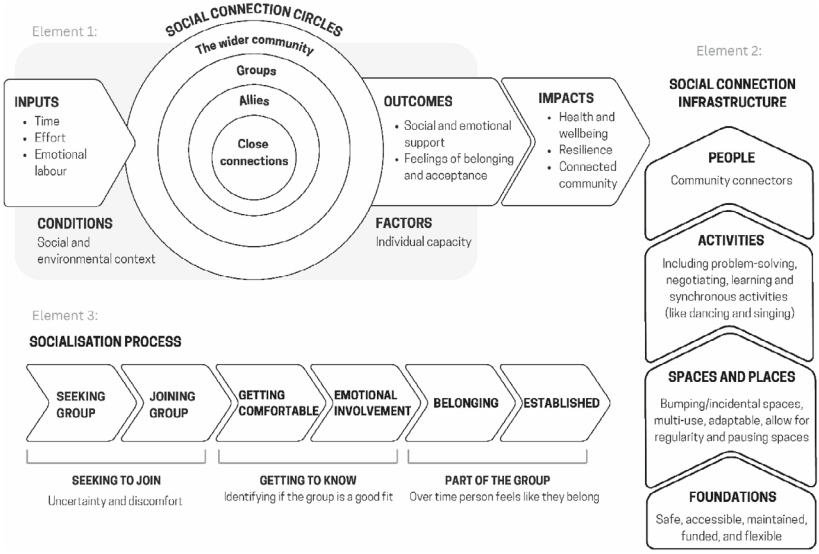

Fig. 4.1 New interdisciplinary model of social connection

- Clearer distinction between different types of social relationships;
- Recognition of effort and emotional labour as key inputs; and
- More precise terminology to better reflect real-world experiences.

The new model reflects three key insights from our research. First, it acknowledges that social connection exists within broader systems rather than operating purely at an individual level. Second, it shows how contextual factors—social, built, technological, and institutional—influence the environment within which connection opportunities emerge. Third, it recognises how individual factors, from health status to digital capabilities, influence how people can navigate these opportunities. (For full discussion of the rationale for our social connection model, see Chapter 1).

While the model maintains its practical orientation for practitioners from different backgrounds, it now offers a more complete picture of the factors that need consideration when designing interventions or support strategies. This enhanced understanding led us to consider social connection through the lens of relationality—how connection emerges from complex interactions between people, places, and experiences.

Understanding Connection as Relational

Another interesting finding that arose, sporadically, across participant conversations was the role of artefacts, cultures, and landscapes as pathways to accessing forms of social connection. Physical objects could serve as 'touchstones' that connect people to others and memories of others. Amanda's 'succulents'—plants from her father's old place—help '*keep his memory alive here*.' Charlotte's discussions about features of the countryside illustrate how landscape helped her to both find a connection with her new country, but also to make connections between herself, her 'home,' and her new environment. She describes her initial '*enchantment*' and disorientation in Australian landscapes compared with her Eastern European home. Over time, she experienced a resonance between memories of home pine forests and local Australian trees: '*when I'm walking along the beach where the pine trees grow; and the wind blows through there… If I close my eyes, I can still be at home in our forests.*' Through such experiences, landscapes become integral to people's state of connection.

Social connection also has a temporal dimension—it's a state that is always in flux, as revealed in the stories in Chapter 3. Participants often

shifted between past and present experiences, reconsidering their state of connectedness even as they spoke. Charlotte captures this fluid nature of connection when she says: '*It's hard to pinpoint an exact moment when things started to feel ok*.' Being or feeling socially connected isn't an 'on' or 'off' switch—it's more of a flow or process, fluctuating through ongoing interactions in a web of feelings, experiences, other people, places, time, and things.

These observations about non-human influences, combined with our insights about how context and individual factors shape connection capabilities, suggest the potential of relationality as a theoretical lens for understanding social connection. Relationality means understanding an experience as composed of many aspects, influenced by forces or flows (Massey, 2005). Neighbourhoods, buildings, and even digital spaces can be viewed as 'spaces of connection' or disconnection—environments that either enable or inhibit social bonds. As Massey (2005) argues, space is a product of inter-relations, formed through interactions and relationships of all kinds, constantly being made and re-made through the interplay of people, things, and perceptions.

Taking a relational perspective opens new vistas for research on social connection, inviting consideration of experiences as composed of flows and factors. It is also a useful practical conceptualisation in offering a common ground for urban designers, community developers, and social prescribers to come together to identify their roles in influencing connection for individuals who are embedded in wider contexts. For policymakers, it offers the potential to imagine more holistic interventions that simultaneously tackle issues affecting societal structures, implement place-based infrastructure, and give individualised support. While relationality stipulates nothing is fixed, and all is in flow, the social connection model can still help to point at elements to consider when taking a relational approach to examining individuals' and place-based populations' states of connection. With this understanding of connection as relational, we now turn to consider the practical implications of our research, offering specific agendas for practice, policy, and research.

From Understanding to Action: Agendas for Practice, Policy, and Research

Our research findings and refined model (see Fig. 4.1) offer new understanding for improving social connection in communities. Below we discuss key implications and suggested actions for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers, focusing on practical ways to move beyond addressing loneliness to actively fostering connection.

For Practice

Throughout our multiple research partnerships over the years, practitioners have consistently asked for accessible, evidence-based insights they can readily apply in their practice. Many already work intuitively, drawing on years of practical experience with community members. Here, we offer actionable insights that complement this existing knowledge and experience.

Social Connection Education

Every community member we spoke with had an intuitive 'feel' for what social connection means, but defining and discussing it proved challenging. Western cultures particularly lack shared language and mental models for understanding social connection. There's a common assumption that forming relationships should be natural and effortless, yet our research findings suggest otherwise. Some people develop sophisticated strategies for making connections, while others struggle with the social labour involved.

Because of this evidence, we suggest community members would benefit from some basic education about social connection. While public discourse often addresses loneliness, isolation, and their health impacts, there's limited practical discussion about how individuals, communities, and society can foster better connection. The social connection model could serve as a useful starting point for these educational discussions, and the stories in Chapter 3 also offer 'real-life' case studies that can be explored. Discussing the model and stories helps people understand that social connection requires time and a lot of effort—it isn't necessarily organic and there are many obstacles to be overcome.

Mapping the Neighbourhood

Using the model, especially the community social infrastructure element, can help to understand and improve the local 'social connection environment,' whether used as a tool for audit or to drive a relational approach. The model highlights the web of factors that influence local people's capabilities to connect (Massey, 2005).

Such an exercise doesn't have to be seen as academic. At a recent workshop, a social prescribing 'link worker' described working with isolated individuals to establish regular coffee meetups where people feel safe to talk. The groups call these meetings 'spaces of safety.' The challenge is scaling up these 'spaces' from coffee meetups to creating 'neighbourhoods of safety' where residents feel welcome and connected. The social connection model could be used to take stock of neighbourhoods' strengths and weaknesses as 'spaces of connection,' perhaps through participatory approaches that engage local residents.

Supporting Digital Connection

Our research reveals that practitioners need to view digital connection as integral to contemporary social relationships rather than as a separate domain. Discussions using the social connection model helped surface that digital capabilities influence connection opportunities across all social circles, from intimate relationships to broader community belonging. This suggests practitioners should incorporate digital connection support into their existing work rather than treating it as an add-on service.

Successful digital connection requires several fundamental capabilities (McCosker et al., 2025, in press) that practitioners can help local people to develop. People need skills to maintain connections across multiple platforms while preserving relationships independent of any single service. They must learn to recognise and respond to platform changes that might affect connection quality, while balancing privacy and security concerns with connection needs. These considerations make digital literacy increasingly crucial for social connection, while also highlighting the need for more stable and trustworthy digital infrastructure (Savic et al., 2025).

Digital connection works differently across various cultural and neighbourhood settings, with social and contextual factors significantly influencing how people use digital tools (McCosker et al., 2025). For example, recent arrivals to an area often use digital tools both to maintain distant relationships and to build local connections.

Practitioners can support digital connection through:

- Incorporating digital literacy into social connection programs;
- Helping people identify which digital tools best suit their connection goals;
- Supporting safe and effective use of digital platforms;
- Creating local digital communities that complement physical gathering spaces;
- Developing peer support networks for digital skill-sharing; and
- Facilitating access to devices and internet connectivity where needed.

The goal isn't to push everyone online but to ensure people can access and navigate digital connection opportunities that enhance their overall social wellbeing. As our research shows, successful digital connection requires both technical skills and social capabilities—areas where practitioners can provide valuable support.

Practice Toolkit

In addition to the next steps for practice outlined above, the Activating Social Connection project co-designed (with practitioners and community members) a toolkit of short, accessible, evidence-based resources to help improve social connection for individuals and communities. These resources cover a range of topics from guides for place-makers on how to generate more pro-social spaces, to how to instil social interaction across existing activities, to practical approaches for supporting digital social connection. The resources translate findings from the Activating Social Connection project, along with existing evidence, into practical frameworks, guidance, and checklists. The co-design process involved:

- Taking research findings to practitioners and community members;
- Holding iterative discussions about knowledge gaps;
- Identifying gaps in resources and designing short, practical resources to fill these; and
- Testing resources with community members and practitioners.

Practitioners involved included community development workers, urban planners and designers, social prescribers, and community members. Community participants were recruited through the council social media and community centre flyers. For a full list of open-access tools and resources, as well as links to these, see Appendix 2.

For Policy

Study findings, coupled with evidence from existing literature, suggest some priorities for policymakers' attention.

Understanding the Causes

A recent review of international social connection policies found an incomplete evidence base was often associated with unclear policy diagnoses and solutions (Goldman et al., 2024). Our analysis of recent literature reveals only limited discussion of the causes of reported high rates of loneliness (see Chapter 1). Our own empirical study found residents' experiences of isolation and loneliness were often linked to their specific circumstances—such as being new to an area, lacking confidence with language, feeling unsure about fitting into the prevailing culture, or struggling with digital access and skills. People felt more connected when part of holistic groupings like faith/religious or ethnic communities, and they particularly valued feeling safe. While not comprehensive, these findings suggest that some contemporary living contexts are inherently disruptive or disorientating, particularly if individuals experience personal factors that are barriers to making social relationships. Policies need to better acknowledge how different factors relating to individual's capability and their living environment, including their digital environment, affect people's experiences of connection.

Achieving Good Social Connection

Policies should be more realistic about the kinds of social connection from which people benefit. While initiatives like social prescribing target fostering group memberships (Haslam et al., 2024), this approach may be insufficiently nuanced. Some policy documents mention 'good social connection' (Mahoney et al., 2024, p. 7), but there's often an assumption that all social relationships will be positive. As we saw in our study, sometimes people don't want new social contacts because they fear negative experiences. Good quality, stable relationships that help people to access resources through bridging and linking social capital are perhaps the gold standard for helpful social connection (Don et al., 2024; Moore & Kawachi, 2017). We suggest there should be a policy discussion identifying what good social connection looks like for individuals and then aligned policy initiatives should be developed that work towards supporting people's achievement of good social connection.

Return of the Institution

Our findings suggest those who are part of 'institutions' like churches, ethnic groups, and sports associations have fewer gaps in their social circles and are less worried about social isolation. Institutional membership gives ready access to different modes to find relationships. There has been a documented decline in participation in various 'connecting institutions' including volunteering, church-going, and trade union membership (UK Government Department of Business and Trade, 2024; Zayed, 2024; Zhu, 2022).

While it's inappropriate to suggest that policy supports churches and sporting groups, or that everyone should be incorporated into an 'institution' to remedy their social isolation, it is important to recognise this fundamental gap in societal structures that ease social connection. In lacking institutional memberships, individuals have to do a lot of extra work on their own, to make relationships. This can be difficult and overwhelming. New ways to access social connection through new types of contemporary institutions are needed. As well, norms of institutional participation need to be (re)established in society. Over decades, western policy has often been anti-collective organisations—take trade unions as a key case in point. Policy needs to take a turn to nurture solidarity (Lederman, 2021).

For Research

As we indicated in Chapter 1, research relating to social isolation, loneliness, and social connection has grown exponentially since the COVID pandemic. While this might suggest the field is saturated, our work points to some important areas needing further investigation.

Diverse Cultural Understandings of Social Connection

As researchers, we find English language and culture lack nuanced terms and descriptions to depict some aspects of social connection. We resort to available words that may be insufficiently specific or open to different interpretations. We wonder if other cultures and languages have terms and ways of thinking about social connection that could inform Westernised ways of conceptualising and understanding connection.

We suggest there is an imperative to study social connection from the perspective of diverse cultures and to consider how ideas might be translated to improve Westernised understanding of social connection.

First Nations perspectives could be a good start. We read that Indigenous Australians understand the idea of a relational connection between all things, a tying of people to place and all that place encompasses, expressed in the term Country (Terare & Rawsthorne, 2020). Indigenous Australians also have distinctive ways of inter-relating with family and extended connections through mutual responsibilities. The imperative of connecting beyond kin to relationships with, and obligations to community and the environment, is picked up across Indigenous cultures internationally, including Inuit Peoples (Baron et al., 2020) and the Scottish Gaelic concept of Duthchas, understood as a 'cultural, ethical and reciprocal relationship with place' (McFadyen & Sandilands, 2021, p. 173). Understanding these different ways of relating could inform both about the idea of social connection, and how to operationalise it, but also about the benefits that might accrue from adopting a perspective of relationships that goes beyond human-to-human connections.

Social Connection as Effort

Our study revealed that many people experience social connection as a form of work, contrasting sharply with popular portrayals of social relationships as natural, organic, and effortless. This work combines emotional demands with practical management—from deciding whether to reach out, to organising activities, to navigating both physical and digital spaces. Some participants used digital technologies to help manage their social connection workload, but others found it challenging to fit connection into busy lives or found the effort insufficiently beneficial.

Further studies exploring the social labour of social connection, including the digital dimensions, would help to understand:

- How to better support people in making and maintaining relationships across both physical and digital spaces;
- Why populations might be increasingly avoiding certain types of connection;
- How to develop more realistic expectations about the emotional and administrative work of connection; and
- What role digital tools play in either reducing or adding to social connection labour.

Research Design

Critics have called out some studies of loneliness as lacking nuance (Hussain et al., 2023). Many different terms are used as if interchangeable for social connection, and digital connection is often treated as separate from 'real' connection. We urge researchers to adopt more specificity in their studies, and to build on other studies with well-defined concepts and outcome measures. There are now more concrete definitions of social connection, and our model could be used as a conceptual framework that helps integrate digital and face-to-face connection. Adopting more consistent definitions, models, and measures would make studies more comparable, thus helping to build an overall more robust evidence base.

Our research highlights the need for studies that address how loneliness, social isolation, and social connection manifest in different contexts. We found multiple people experiencing anxiety about not fitting in, whether due to being new to their suburb, living in environments where they couldn't find people like them, or struggling with digital inclusion. These experiences may have different characteristics in different contexts and arise for different reasons. Understanding connection challenges in different environments—including digital environments—will help inform better interventions to help people connect in their communities.

Limitations

Before concluding, we should acknowledge several limitations of this work. Firstly, regarding positionality, we are three researchers with specific backgrounds. We are, respectively, from Scotland (with expertise in community-led local development), Serbia (with a background in youth work, intercultural learning, and digital media), and Australia as a second-generation Asian Australian (with a background in urban planning). Our perspectives and experiences have inevitably influenced how we understand social connection and how we interpret research findings (Huvila, 2011).

In terms of literature coverage, we acknowledge we haven't read everything available and relevant—this would take several lifetimes! There will be key studies and theories we haven't mentioned, particularly given the rapid growth in social connection research since the pandemic. Our approach has been to synthesise evidence and theory that speaks directly

to practical applications, rather than attempting comprehensive coverage of any single-disciplinary perspective.

The main study reported here occurred at a particular time and context, so findings aren't necessarily widely generalisable. The study provides a snapshot across diverse lives, and we know from follow-up contact that participants' circumstances have changed—sometimes feeling more connected, sometimes experiencing new challenges. Study participants were recruited through council community development workers and a mental health service, which shaped our sample. We would have liked more participation from certain population groups—notably men under 60 years and people in full-time work. Additionally, while we explored digital connection, our sample might not fully represent the range of digital engagement patterns in these communities.

Our work with practitioners has informed and often co-designed our approaches and outputs, including the social connection model. While this strengthens practical applicability, it may mean we've focused more on certain aspects of social connection that align with current practice needs rather than exploring other potentially important dimensions.

Conclusions

This book presents a social connection model that is informed by different domains of knowledge. The social connection circles draw from Robin Dunbar's research on the social brain, while the community social infrastructure component integrates insights from urban planning, health, and sociology. Many researchers whose work informed the model are themselves 'hybrid researchers'—Dunbar's work spans cognitive science, evolutionary psychology, and anthropology, while Putnam's social capital work has influenced economics, sociology, disaster planning, and urban design. This suggests that—to be fully understood—social connection inherently demands multiple disciplinary perspectives.

Perhaps this explains why practitioners have found the model useful (see Chapter 1) and why it proved valuable for research (see Chapters 2 and 3). The model synthesises complex information about social connection into a practical framework that:

- moves beyond loneliness by describing key aspects of social connection and what influences it, helping to catalyse strengths-based approaches;

- combines individual factors with place-based community contexts, showing how various elements work together to enable or inhibit social connection; and
- functions as a 'boundary object' (Star & Griesemer, 1989) that helps different stakeholders understand their role in fostering connectedness while revealing common ground for collective action.

However, the model challenges disciplinary purists and can encounter resistance within organisational silos. This tension—between the model's potential to unite different approaches and the practical challenges of implementation—reflects a broader challenge in addressing complex social issues. While interdisciplinary approaches often best capture the reality of human experience, they must operate within systems designed around disciplinary boundaries.

Throughout our research, one striking finding stands out: people light up when talking about social connection rather than loneliness. This shift in perspective—from deficit to possibility—opens new conversations and opportunities. Our participants shared rich, complex stories about their journeys towards connection, their strategies, their struggles, and their moments of breakthrough. These weren't stories of isolation, but of active engagement with the challenge of building meaningful connections in contemporary environments.

As living, working, and leisure environments continue to evolve, understanding how to foster connection becomes increasingly crucial. Digital and physical worlds interweave in complex ways, creating both opportunities and challenges for connection. The task ahead isn't just about addressing loneliness—it's about building communities where connection can flourish in all its forms, whether face-to-face or digital, intimate, or communal.

The journey to social connection may require effort, but it's one that strengthens not just individuals but entire communities. When people feel genuinely connected—whether through a neighbourhood chat group, a community garden, or a local sports team—they become more resilient, more willing to help others, and more invested in their community's future. Our participants' stories show us that even in challenging circumstances, connection creates ripples of positive change. Every person who finds their way to meaningful connection, every community that builds stronger bonds, and every practitioner who helps facilitate these connections contributes to a more connected, caring, and resilient society. This

isn't just about solving loneliness—it's about creating communities where everyone has the opportunity to belong, contribute, and thrive.

References

Baron, M., Fletcher, C., & Riva, M. (2020). Aging, health and place from the perspective of Elders in an Inuit Community. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology, 35*(1), 133–153.

Bretherton, R., & Dunbar, R. I. M. (2020). Dunbar's Number goes to Church: The Social Brain Hypothesis as a third strand in the study of church growth. *Archive for the Psychology of Religion, 42*(1), 63–76. https://doi.org/10.1177/0084672419882922

Caporaso, J. A., & Jupille, J. (Eds.). (2022). *Theories of institutions*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139034142

Department for Business and Trade. (2024, May 29). *Trade Union Membership, UK 1995 to 2023: Statistical Bulletin* [Statistical bulletin]. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/665db15a0c8f88e868d334b8/Trade_Union_Membership_UK_1995_to_2023_Statistical_Bulletin.pdf

Don, B. P., Gordon, A. M., & Berry Mendes, W. (2024). The good, the bad, and the variable: Examining stress and blood pressure responses to close relationships. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 15*(3), 288–298. https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506231190861

Dunbar, R. I. M. (2023). The origins and function of musical performance. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*, 1257390. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1257390

Ellery, P. J., Ellery, J., & Borkowsky, M. (2021). Toward a theoretical understanding of placemaking. *International Journal of Community Well-Being, 4*(1), 55–76. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42413-020-00088-7

Farmer, J., Jovanovski, N., De Cotta, T., Gaylor, E., Panah, A. S., Jones, H., & Farmer, J. (2019). *Healthy social connections: A multi-disciplinary exploration*. Swinburne University of Technology.

Gaffney, J. (2020). *Political loneliness: Modern liberal subjects in hiding*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Goldman, N., Khanna, D., El Asmar, M. L., Qualter, P., & El-Osta, A. (2024). Addressing loneliness and social isolation in 52 countries: A scoping review of National policies. *BMC Public Health, 24*(1), 1207. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-18568-5

Hall, J. A., & Davis, D. C. (2017). Proposing the communicate bond belong theory: Evolutionary interactions with episodic interpersonal communication. *Communication Theory, 27*(1), 21–47. https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12091

Haslam, S. A., Haslam, C., Cruwys, T., Sharman, L. S., Hayes, S., Walter, Z., Jetten, J., Steffens, N. K., Cardona, M., La Rue, C. J., & McNamara, N. (2024). Tackling loneliness together: A three-tier social identity framework for social prescribing. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 27*(5), 1128–1150. https://doi.org/10.1177/13684302231218704

Henderson, S. R. (2019). Outer metropolitan areas and infrastructure deficits: Policy dynamics on the edge of Melbourne, Australia. *Cities, 90*, 24–31. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2019.01.023

Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.

Hussain, B., Mirza, M., Baines, R., Burns, L., Stevens, S., Asthana, S., & Chatterjee, A. (2023). Loneliness and social networks of older adults in rural communities: A narrative synthesis systematic review. *Frontiers in Public Health, 11*, 1113864. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1113864

Huvila, I. (2011). The politics of boundary objects: Hegemonic interventions and the making of a document. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, 62*(12), 2528–2539. https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.21639

Karg, A., De Cotta, T., Farmer, J., Aryani, A., Knox, J., & Kamstra, P. (2021). *Infrastructure for social connection: Researching the existing assets for creating social connectedness and identifying interventions*. Swinburne University of Technology.

Kilpatrick, S., Farmer, J., Emery, S., Kamstra, P., Steiner, A., McCosker, A., & Carlisle, K. (2023). Community transformed? Exploring the interaction between online support and rural community life for people with acute mental health conditions. *Journal of Rural Studies, 99*, 167–175. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2023.03.019

Knox, J., Farmer, J., Naccarella, L., Verhagen, J., & Emery, S. (2024). *Social connection toolkit for residential aged care: Development and evaluation*. Swinburne University of Technology.

Lederman, Z. (2021). The bioethics of loneliness. *Bioethics, 35*(5), 446–455. https://doi.org/10.1111/bioe.12850

Lewis, S., Willis, K., Smith, L., Dubbin, L., Rogers, A., Moensted, M. L., & Smallwood, N. (2024). There but not really involved: The meanings of loneliness for people with chronic illness. *Social Science & Medicine, 343*, Article 116596. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.116596

Mahoney, J., et al. (2024). *Measuring social connectedness in OECD countries: A scoping review* (OECD Papers on Well-being and Inequalities, No. 28). OECD Publishing, Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/f758bd20-en

Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. Sage Publications.

McCosker, A., Savic, M., & Farmer, J. (2025, in press). Social connection capabilities and digital inclusion: A typology for addressing loneliness and isolation at the urban fringe. *Social Media + Society*.

McFadyen, M., & Sandilands, R. (2021). On 'cultural darning and mending': Creative responses to Ceist an Fhearainn/the land question in the Gaidhealtachd. *Scottish Affairs, 30*(2), 157–177. https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2021.0372

Moore, S., & Kawachi, I. (2017). Twenty years of social capital and health research: A glossary. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health, 71*(5), 513–517. https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2016-208477

Nicholls, L., Phelan, K., & Maller, C. (2018). A fantasy to get employment around the area: Long commutes and resident health in an outer urban master-planned estate. *Urban Policy and Research, 36*(1), 48–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/08111146.2017.1308859

Pahl, R., & Spencer, L. (2010). *Family, friends and personal communities: Changing models-in-the-mind* (ISER Working Paper Series No. 2010-01). University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER).

Putnam, R. D. (2020). "Bowling alone: America's declining social capital": Journal of democracy (1995). In *The city reader* (pp. 142–150). Routledge.

Roggenbuck, C. (2019). Diverse lived experiences of community in master-planned estates: A case study of Filipino and Indian migrants in Wyndham. *Urban Policy and Research, 37*(2), 185–198. https://doi.org/10.1080/08111146.2019.1578954

Savic, M., McCosker, A., & Farmer, J. (2025, in press). Navigating isolation: Mobilising a digital social connection ecosystem on the urban fringe. *Information, Communication & Society*.

Soltani-Panah, A., De Cotta, T., Farmer, J., & Aryani, A. (2018). The Circles of Connections: An evidence-based social visualisation tool to diagnose strengths and weaknesses of your social connections. *The Journal of Community Informatics, 14*(1).

Star, S. L., & Griesemer, J. R. (1989). Institutional ecology, 'translations' and boundary objects: Amateurs and professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907–39. *Social Studies of Science, 19*(3), 387–420.

Terare, M., & Rawsthorne, M. (2020). Country is yarning to me: Worldview, health and well-being amongst Australian First Nations People. *British Journal of Social Work, 50*(3), 944–960. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcz128

Verhagen, J., Karg, A., Sivasubramaniam, D., Yeomans, C., Farmer, J., & De Cotta, T. (2025). *Measuring social connection: Social Innovation Research Institute's Social Connection Measurement (SIRI-SCM) Toolkit*.

Williams, G. H. (2003). The determinants of health: Structure, context and agency. *Sociology of Health & Illness, 25*(3), 131–154. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.00342

Zayed, Y. (2024, July 4). *Constituency data: Religion*. House of Commons Library. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/constituency-data-religion/

Zhu, R. (2022). *The Decline of Formal Volunteering in Australia (2001–2020): Insights from the HILDA Survey*. Volunteering Australia. https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/VRP_The-Decline-of-Formal-Volunteering-in-Australia-2001-2020-Insights-from-the-HILDASurvey

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

Appendix 1: List of Study Participants

*Participant name**	*Age*	*Sex*	*Employment*	*Language other than English*	*Household*	*Born in Australia*
COUNCIL AREA 1						
Ira	25 to 34	F	Employed FT	Y	Couple with children	N
Issa	25 to 34	M	Employed PT	Y	Multi-family household	N
Iman	25 to 34	F	Freelance	Y	Multi-family household	N
Asher	25 to 34	F	Volunteer	Y	Group household (e.g. share house)	N
Skylar	50 to 59	F	Volunteer	Y	Couple without children	N
Cora	50 to 59	F	Unemployed—looking		One parent family	Y
Amal	50 to 59	F	Employed PT	Y	Couple with children	N

(continued)

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2026

J. Farmer et al., *Beyond Loneliness*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-9509-6

(continued)

*Participant name**	*Age*	*Sex*	*Employment*	*Language other than English*	*Household*	*Born in Australia*
Chane	60 to 69	F	Employed FT	Y	Couple without children	N
Bo	60 to 69	F	Retired	Y	Couple without children	N
Ishani	60 to 69	F	Employed PT	Y	Single person household	N
Lydia	70 to 84	F	Retired		Single person household	Y
Eli	70 to 84	M	Unemployed—not looking	Y	Couple without children	N
Ela	70 to 84	F	Retired	Y	Multi-family household	N
Adrian	70 to 84	M	Retired		Group household (e.g. share house)	N
Adi	70 to 84	M	Retired	Y	Multi-family household	N
COUNCIL AREA 2						
Emery	18 to 24	M	Employed PT		Couple without children	Y
Cristina	18 to 24	F	Employed PT		Single person household	Y
Avery	35 to 49	F	Housewife	Y	Couple with children	N
Dhairya	35 to 49	F	Employed FT	Y	Couple with children	N
Elena	35 to 49	F	Employed PT	Y	One parent family	N

(continued)

(continued)

*Participant name**	*Age*	*Sex*	*Employment*	*Language other than English*	*Household*	*Born in Australia*
Zariya	50 to 59	F	Sick leave	Y	Single person household	N
Helen	35 to 49	F	Employed PT	Y	Multi-family household	N
Susan	35 to 49	F	Employed FT	Y	Couple with children	N
Amanda	35 to 49	F	Unemployed—looking		One parent family	Y
Aya	35 to 49	F	Unemployed—not looking	Y	One parent family	Y
Brenda	35 to 49	F	Employed PT		Couple with children	Y
Reem	50 to 59	F	Unemployed—not looking	Y	Couple with children	N
Sara	60 to 69	F	Unemployed—not looking	Y	Couple without children	N
COUNCIL AREA 3						
Maeve	18 to 24	Prefer not to say	Employed PT		Multi-family household	Y
Jaleya	18 to 24	F	TAFE	Y	Group household (e.g. share house)	N
Tamsin	18 to 24	F	Unemployed—looking	Y	Multi-family household	N
Noah	35 to 49	M	Employed PT		One parent family	Y
Luna	35 to 49	F	Employed PT	Y	Couple with children	N

(continued)

(continued)

*Participant name**	*Age*	*Sex*	*Employment*	*Language other than English*	*Household*	*Born in Australia*
Charlotte	50 to 59	F	Employed PT		Couple without children	N
Camila	60 to 69	F	Retired		Single person household	Y
Eleanor	60 to 69	F	Employed PT		Couple without children	Y
Scarlett	60 to 69	F	Retired		Single person household	Y
Levi	60 to 69	M	Retired		Prefer t to answer	Y
Olivia	60 to 69	F	Retired		Single person household	N
Elizabeth	70 to 84	F	Retired		Single person household	Y
Sofia	70 to 84	F	Retired	Y	Single person household	N
Madeline	70 to 84	F	Active volunteer		Couple plus 2 refugee women	Y
Henry	70 to 84	M	Retired		Couple without children	Y
Logan	85 +	M	Retired		Couple without children	N

*All participants and council names have been deidentified and replaced with pseudonyms.

Appendix 2: Project Resource Table

Resource name	*Description*	*Link*
SOCIAL CONNECTION 101 (REVISED)	Provides foundational knowledge and practical approaches to understanding and promoting social connection Useful for: **Staff training, onboarding, or initial project design**	https://bit.ly/42wcsgm
DIGITAL SOCIAL CONNECTION 101	Focuses on strategies to cultivate meaningful and healthy social connections in digital environments Useful for: **Practitioners looking at designing, managing, or engaging with online communities or digital platforms**	https://bit.ly/42wajBk
PLACEMAKING FOR SOCIAL CONNECTION 101	Offers guidance on designing and developing spaces that encourage social interactions and community building Useful for: **Understanding how to create spaces that foster natural social interaction**	https://bit.ly/3Gljvkk

(continued)

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2026

J. Farmer et al., *Beyond Loneliness*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-9509-6

(continued)

Resource name	*Description*	*Link*
7 KEYS TO SOCIAL CONNECTION	Outlines seven fundamental principles essential for enhancing social connections Useful for: **Starting to understand how to plan programs or assessenvironments**	https://bit.ly/42KfUFe
MEASURING SOCIAL CONNECTION: *Social Innovation Research Institute's Social Connection Measurement (SIRI-SCM) Toolkit*	A measurement framework, methodologies, and tools for assessing levels of social connection within communities Useful for: **Researchers, community organisations, and governments of all levels**	https://bit.ly/4ia8Y8R
SOCIAL CONNECTION PROGRAM EVALUATION TOOLKIT	Frameworks and tools for evaluating the effectiveness of social connection programs Useful for: **Program grant reporting, continuous improvement, and impact assessment**	https://bit.ly/4jk6TIX
SOCIAL CONNECTION ORGANISATION ROLES FOR CONNECTED COMMUNITIES	Outlines the roles different parts of an organisation can play in fostering connected and cohesive communities Useful for: **Strategic planning, role clarification, and partnership building**	https://bit.ly/4jcGa0Y
MY JOURNEY OF SOCIAL CONNECTION: *A Guidebook to Help You Explore Social Connection*	A collaborative effort between Neami National and Swinburne, this guidebook assists individuals and carers in exploring and enhancing their personal social connections Useful for: **1:1 support, program development, coaching, or therapeutic settings**	https://bit.ly/3G7dZ4R

(continued)

(continued)

Resource name	*Description*	*Link*
SUPPORTING ACCESS AND INCLUSION FOR SOCIAL CONNECTION: *Community Provider Resource*	Offers strategies for community providers to promote inclusive practices that facilitate social connections Useful for: **Small to large community services and programs operating with limited resources to reflect on their practices,implement effective strategies, and collaborate to activate social connection within their communities**	https://bit.ly/3XYPyg4
SOCIAL CONNECTION GUIDE FOR ACTIVITY PLANNING	Offers practical advice for planning activities that promote social interaction and community engagement Useful for: **Program co-ordinators and planners as a hands-on tool for organising community activities**	https://bit.ly/4jxpssU
THE CONNECT & SHARE TOOLKIT	Offers strategies and tools to facilitate sharing and connection within communities Useful for: **Neighbourhood projects, community development, and local community and peer support initiatives**	https://bit.ly/4ia8XSl
READY, SET, CONNECT: A GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES	Provides insights and tips for organising and executing community activities that effectively promote social connections Useful for: **Grassroots groups and local councils**	https://bit.ly/4j73I7h

Glossary

This glossary provides definitions for key terms used in the book, reflecting our understanding of these terms and how they are applied within the context of this work.

Term	*Definition*
Belonging	A psychological state of feeling accepted and connected within a social group or community. Involves both emotional attachment and recognition of one's place within a social context
Bumping Spaces	Informal places where people naturally encounter others in their community. These spaces facilitate casual, unplanned social interactions that can develop into more meaningful connections. Examples include school gates, local shops, and community centre entrances
Casual Familiarity	Being among others without necessarily directly interacting; a form of social connection through shared presence. This concept recognises the value of passive social contact in building community belonging

(continued)

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2026

J. Farmer et al., *Beyond Loneliness*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-9509-6

(continued)

Term	*Definition*
Community connectors	People who actively help others build social connections, whether in formal or informal roles. These individuals may be professionals (like social prescribers or community development workers) or informal leaders who naturally take on connecting roles within their communities
Digital Social Connection Ecosystem	The complex web of online tools and platforms that people use to support different types of relationships. Includes how individuals strategically use various digital platforms to maintain different types of relationships and manage their social labour
Emotional labour	The psychological effort of managing feelings and emotional responses in social relationships, including regulating one's own emotions and responding to others' emotional needs
Foundations (of Social Connection)	The basic qualities that make spaces and places welcoming for social interaction, including safety, accessibility, and choice. These represent the fundamental requirements for enabling social connection in community spaces
Loneliness	The subjective, unpleasant emotional experience of perceiving one's social relationships as deficient in some important way. Distinguished from objective social isolation and can occur even when surrounded by others
Micro-connections	Brief, regular interactions that contribute to a sense of belonging. These might include exchanges with local shopkeepers, regular passersby, or others encountered in daily routines
Permission to Connect	The implicit or explicit social cues that make it acceptable to initiate interaction. Includes cultural signifiers (such as shared language, clothing, or cultural practices), shared activities, or formal introductions that serve as invitations for connection. These cues help people identify potential connections and navigate initial social interactions
Place Attachment	Emotional bonds people develop with specific locations or environments. Includes both physical and social aspects of connection to place

(continued)

(continued)

Term	*Definition*
Reciprocity	The mutual exchange of support, resources, or care in social relationships. Can operate in different ways: some relationships (like close friendships or family) involve giving without the expectation of immediate return, while others function more as exchange relationships where support is given with the expectation of reciprocation. A key component in building and maintaining sustainable social connections
Sociable Spaces	Environments where people can be among others without pressure for direct interaction. These spaces support casual familiarity and optional social engagement
Social Allies	People who provide and receive practical and informational support in reciprocal relationships. Distinguished from closest relationships by the nature of support exchanged
Social Capital	Both a process and resource arising from reciprocal support within social networks. Can exist at individual and community levels, enabling access to help, information, and collective resources. Takes different forms: • Bonding social capital: connections between similar people (like family or close community ties) • Bridging social capital: connections between different groups or communities • Linking social capital: connections between individuals and institutions or authority figures, providing access to resources and power structures These different forms of social capital work together to create comprehensive support networks and community resources
Social Connection	A state comprised of an individual's subjective evaluation of their social world across multiple dimensions, including relationship structures, access to resources/support, relationship quality, and feelings of connection. Being socially connected means perceiving that one has sufficient relationships and support to meet their needs across these dimensions, rather than referring to an objective quantity of social contacts

(continued)

(continued)

Term	*Definition*
Social Cohesion	The extent of connectedness and solidarity among different groups in society, contributing to stable and peaceful communities
Social Connection Infrastructure	Physical and digital structures that support social interaction, including foundations, spaces, activities, and people. Encompasses both built environment and social/organisational elements that facilitate connection
Social Inclusion	Equal access to opportunities for full participation in economic, social, political, and cultural life within a society. Distinguished from social connection
Social Isolation	The objective state of having limited social contacts or relationships, measured by quantity and frequency of social interactions. Distinguished from the subjective state of loneliness
Social Labour	The overall work of creating and maintaining social relationships, including both practical aspects (organising, participating, maintaining contact) and emotional labour. Encompasses time management, physical presence, and administrative tasks alongside emotional work
Social Ties	Relationships that vary in intensity and investment, ranging from strong ties (close, emotionally intense relationships requiring significant time and emotional investment) to weak ties (casual, less demanding connections). While strong ties often provide emotional support and intimate connection, weak ties serve as important bridges to different social networks and resources and are crucial for community integration
Socialisation	The stages people go through when joining new groups or communities, including seeking to join, getting to know, and belonging. Recognises that building social connections is a gradual process requiring time and effort
Strategic Withdrawal	Conscious choice to limit social connections for wellbeing purposes. Recognises that managing social labour sometimes requires intentional disconnection

(continued)

(continued)

Term	*Definition*
Third Spaces	Places that are neither home nor work where people can spend time without pressure to purchase anything. Important for facilitating casual social interaction and community building
Urban Fringe Suburbs	Rapidly developing areas on the outskirts of cities, characterised by new housing developments and population growth. These present specific challenges and opportunities for social connection

Index

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2026

J. Farmer et al., *Beyond Loneliness*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-9509-6