A heuristic inquiry into the experience of loneliness: access to greater self-knowledge as well as reflective-practice

“...the challenge is to know of our history and to find ways of working with it so that it does not unknowingly become enacted as part of the therapeutic process” (Reeves, 2014, p.9)

“The heuristic process is autobiographic, yet, with virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social – and perhaps universal – significance” (Moustakas, 1990, p.15)

Stephen Ferris, PhD
Counsellor - IAPT
Structure of the presentation

Part A – Opening statements
Background, context, purpose and method

Part B – Findings
Selective – focus on the major finding

Part C – Implications
For practitioners

Part D – Reading of my creative synthesis entitled,

A metaphoric tale of love lost and found
Part A

Background, context, purpose and method

Background

All heuristic inquiry begins with the internal search to discover, a passionate desire to know, a devotion and commitment to pursue a question that is strongly connected to one’s own identity and selfhood (Moustakas, 1990).
Part A

Background, context, purpose and method

Context

Loneliness is commonly described as an individual’s lack of sufficient social relations in terms of either quality and/or quantity (Saygin, Akdeniz and Deniz, 2015).

What if it isn’t?
Part A
Background, context, purpose and method

Purpose

Loneliness is rarely explicitly addressed in the [counselling] literature (Bohm, 2012).
Part A

Background, context, purpose and method

Method (Moustakas, 1990, pp.27-32)

Phases –

Initial Engagement,
Immersion,
Incubation,
Illumination,
Explication,
Creative Synthesis

Use of self – ‘...researcher’s subjectivity as the main instrument of the method’ (Rennie, 2004)
Criticisms!

Too inward looking....

Navel-gazing....

Self-indulgent....

Fails to address ‘....the more outgoing dialogic and culturally embedded relationships between researcher and researched’ (Speedy, 2001).
Part B: Findings – The early stages...
Part B: Findings
My encounter with loneliness...

“Deep within me, I saw my own loneliness for the very first time. The feelings and the emotions I experienced during the analytic phase were strong and powerful. I so wanted to avoid them and I tried, in vain, to do so. These feelings and emotions were taking me back to the very place from where the research questions had emerged and from where the primary data had come – to the home and to the heart of my loneliness, somewhere inside the deepest and darkest recesses of my being...."
Arrival...
From my Research Journal...

“I became imprisoned within my own self, behind strong bars of insecurity, unworthiness and constant self-doubt. Self-hatred and shame lined the walls like solid bricks and the strong, thick, bolted prison door was made of steel-like fear...”

“The loneliness grew and grew around this inner prison just like climbing ivy can cover an entire house, and so very rapidly. At first, I welcomed this additional layer of protection. Like camouflage, I thought to myself - ‘It would make it much harder for anyone to notice or to even get a glimpse of what might be underneath it. More importantly, I, myself, might be able to forget about it completely!’”

“But, over time, the protection and camouflage became suffocating as the ivy – my loneliness and longing – just grew and grew, becoming stronger and thicker, increasing in density and reducing the light...of my life. And what or who was inside this inner jail? I was inside it – ‘little me’ – waiting...longing....and hoping that we would meet up again...”
A polluted and contaminated river...
The Blue Lagoon...
Part C: **Implications - immediate**

*For healthcare/nursing/counselling practice & counselling/psychological research*

**Reflect**

**Awareness**

**Frame**
Part C: Implications
For healthcare/nursing/counselling practice & counselling/psychological research

Reflect – talk about loneliness, mention the word

[Initial] Awareness – rather than a [an immediate] solution

Frame – it might not always be related to a social relational deficit
Part C: **Implications**
*For healthcare/nursing/counselling practice & counselling/psychological research*

“I don’t believe the cure for loneliness is meeting someone, not necessarily.

I think it’s about two things:

- learning how to befriend yourself and
- understanding that many of the things that seem to affect us as individuals are in fact a result of larger forces of stigma and exclusion,

which can and should be resisted”.

(Laing, 2016, p.281)
The Creative Synthesis

A metaphorical tale of love lost and found


Speedy J. (2001) Singing over the bones: a narrative inquiry into the construction of research and practice cultures and professional identities by counsellor educators at the University of Bristol and within the UK. PhD dissertation. University of Bristol.

Select references

   [In this book, the author reflects on his own experience of loneliness and then begins to explore the 'concepts' of loneliness – loneliness anxiety, existential loneliness, the lonely experience, isolation and the loneliness of public life]

   [The author continues to reflect on loneliness in his own life and in his own experience. In this particular volume, Moustakas describes how loneliness might be thought of not only as a 'positive good' but as a necessity. He suggests that loneliness can help a person move toward more authenticity, more honesty, and, therefore, toward more meaningful love relationships with his fellow human beings.]

   [This book contains a sample of the many letters the author received from, ‘...teachers to drug addicts to bereaved parents’. It also contains some of the letters the author wrote to himself in time of crisis and challenge.]

   [This book is co-authored by father and daughter. They have lived through the ideas - values, feelings and thoughts of loneliness, creativity and love - that are expressed in this book. Very reflective and thought-provoking.]

   [For the science-savvy. The author draws from his research on brain imaging, analysis of blood pressure, immune response, stress hormones, behaviour, and gene expression, to show just how intertwined and interdependent – physiologically as well as psychologically – we are as human beings.]

   [For those who might want to enter into a philosophical inquiry into the nature of loneliness. The author draws on the fields of psychology, literature, and philosophy.]

   [The author presents five steps to overcoming loneliness in this very readable and practical self-help book.]

   [Weiss builds upon an analytically and therapeutically useful distinction between two 'sorts' of loneliness: emotional isolation and social isolation, which is often discussed in modern journal and academic articles]
Frieda Fromm-Reichmann...

“...what inner forces...”

“She raised her hand with her thumb lifted, the other four fingers bent toward her palm...”

“That lonely?”

“...facial expression loosened up as though in great relief and gratitude, and her fingers opened”
The lethality of loneliness...

Loneliness can hasten death...
Loneliness can send misleading hormonal signals...
Rejiggers the molecules on genes that govern behaviour...
Long-lasting loneliness not only makes you sick; it can kill you...
Emotional isolation is ranked as high a risk factor for mortality as smoking...
A partial list of the physical diseases thought to be caused or exacerbated by loneliness would include –
Alzheimer’s/Obesity/Diabetes/even cancer- tumours can metastasize faster in lonely people
Who are the lonely?

They’re the outsiders –
Not just the elderly, but also the poor, the bullied, the different...
Those who feel discriminated against...

Some research suggests that women are lonelier than men and other research that suggests the opposite
Unmarried men are lonelier than unmarried women
Less educated are lonelier than the better educated
Unemployed and retired are lonelier than the employed
Those who feel rejected – this is a key part of feeling lonely
Our inner world...

The physical world of our bodies gets remodelled by our psychic and conceptual worlds...
Cacioppo...

We are hardwired to find life unpleasant outside the safety of trusted friends and family...
Loneliness -

...is made as well as given.

Nature demands nurture...

Deprive us of the attention of a loving, reliable parent, and, if nothing happens to make up for that lack, we’ll tend toward loneliness for the rest of our lives. Not only that, but our loneliness will make us moody, self-doubting, angry, pessimistic, shy, and hypersensitive to criticism.

Emotional impoverishment embeds itself in the body
Definition...

Loneliness is the want of intimacy...

Cacioppo privileges the emotion over the social fact because he is sure that it’s the feeling that wreaks havoc on the body and brain.

Loneliness is a failure of social networks – the lonely don’t have social support and get sicker than the non-lonely because they don’t have people to take care of them.

W.H. Auden – ‘We must love one another or die’.
Moustakas vs Ferris (2018)

Loneliness is a source of creativity (Moustakas) ‘vs’ Loneliness is a cause of suffering (Ferris)

Moustakas sees loneliness as a gift, offering a new way of looking at him/herself ‘vs’ Ferris sees loneliness as something that masks or covers the self - leading to a distorted way of looking at oneself and others.

Loneliness is not homelessness (Moustakas) ‘vs’ Loneliness is homelessness (Ferris)

Loneliness creates connection within and without (Moustakas) ‘vs’ Loneliness is separation and disconnection within and without (Ferris)

Loneliness is neither good nor bad (Moustakas) ‘vs’ Loneliness is harmful and destructive, even deadly (Ferris)

Loneliness restores humanity (Moustakas) ‘vs’ Loneliness diminishes life and humanity (Ferris)
Heuristic Inquiry and Person-centred therapy

Close links –
Focusses on feelings and meanings of experience
Seeks out the internal frame of reference
A place for the ‘me’ in the research
Transformative – self-knowledge, personal learning, and change

(Stiles, 1993, p.604)