



Loneliness: From Absence of Other to Disruption of Self

Valeria N. Motta¹

Accepted: 31 October 2023 / Published online: 17 November 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract

Loneliness is more complex and multi-faceted than it may appear at first glance. Most of the characterizations that we have of loneliness in the extant literature tend to focus on the absence of other people and on the social, mental, and physical distress that can be caused by this type of absence. Although the experience of absence may be a fundamental and encompassing aspect of loneliness, loneliness may also reflect a deeper, more complex experience. This paper integrates data from a qualitative study on the phenomenology of loneliness with philosophical theories on the self. It argues that there is a connection between the experience of absence and the impossibility to appear in the world and that this may consequentially lead to the disruption of self-experience.

Keywords Loneliness · Self · Phenomenology · Qualitative research

1 Introduction

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean Paul Sartre describes going to a café for an appointment with his friend Pierre:

“I have an appointment with Pierre at four o’clock I arrive at the café a quarter of an hour late. Pierre is always punctual. Will he have waited for me? I look at the room, the patrons, and I say, “He is not here.” It is certain that the café by itself - with its patrons, its tables, its booths, its mirrors, its light, its smoky atmosphere, and the sounds of voices, rattling saucers, and footsteps which fill it - is a fullness of being. [But] when I enter this café to search for Pierre, there is formed a synthetic organization of all the objects in the café on the ground of which Pierre is given as about to appear. But now Pierre is not here. This does not mean that I discover his absence in some precise spot in the establishment. In fact, Pierre is absent from the whole café; his absence fixes the café in its evanescence [...]. Pierre’s absence supposes an original relation between me and this café; there is an infinity of people who are

without any relation with this café for want of a real expectation which establishes their absence. But, to be exact, I myself expected to see Pierre, and my expectation has caused the absence of Pierre to happen as a real event concerning this café. Pierre absent haunts this café and is the condition of its self-nihilating organization as ground.” (Sartre 1943, p. 9).

The context here is Sartre’s reflections on negative judgments and their relationship with non-being. However, these lines also reveal some of the effects that experiencing the absence of another can have on one’s entire experiential field. As Sartre describes it, the expectation of seeing his friend in the café established his own relationship with the meeting place. In the absence of his friend, his experience of the place itself is modified. Sartre’s example serves as an illustration of what the absence of a specific someone he was expecting to see did to his experience of a particular place.

Loneliness is an essential phenomenological topic with a unique intentional structure that affects the entire experiential field. Sartre reflects “a man evaporates without an eye-witness” (Sartre, 1962, p. 168) and this suggests that it is not the mere presence of the other but rather the perspective of the other that can affect my own experience of the world and of myself. In this sense, there is nothing rigid and one-dimensional about our experiential field, and an absence of

✉ Valeria N. Motta
valerianmotta@gmail.com

¹ School of Psychology, University of Birmingham, Hills Building, Edgbaston Park Rd, B15 2TT Birmingham, UK

a friend is very different from an ivory piece that has been removed from a chessboard.

Loneliness presents a unique chance for exploring our human condition and social behaviour. Feelings of isolation and a lack of connection with people can be experienced either for long or short periods of time, throughout a person's life. Loneliness is often described in relation to feelings of disconnection and the absence of others. However, describing loneliness based on feelings arising from the absence of others can blur the line between loneliness and social isolation. It also does not clarify why temporary solitude can be an enjoyable state.

Being lonely differs from being socially isolated. Loneliness is characterized as a painful subjective emotional state occurring when there is a discrepancy between desired and achieved patterns of social interaction (Peplau et al. 1979). It is conceptualized as an entirely subjective state, involving feelings of disconnection, not necessarily dependent on the quantity of one's social relations (Peplau and Perlman 1982). Social isolation, on the other hand, is described as a state of not being surrounded by people. Scientific research on loneliness shows that our physical bodies can regulate the chemistry of our connections and that the physical proximity of other people is necessary to prevent loneliness (Cacioppo et al. 2015). However, it is also well known that the mere physical presence of others is not enough to prevent loneliness. The *perception* of social isolation can have the same effects in both physical and psychological health as objective social isolation (Cacioppo & Patrick 2008) but, what exactly is involved in this type of perception?

There are recent philosophical accounts of loneliness that focus on the significance of social connections and what the absence of those connections represent (e.g., see Roberts and Krueger 2021; Tietjen and Furtak 2021). However, in a previous paper I have argued that loneliness is more multifaceted than we originally thought (Motta 2021). Since it is a phenomenon related to the nature of our interpersonal experiences, clarifying the nature of loneliness necessarily involves investigating the nature of intersubjectivity and sociality. There are different types of loneliness and some of them may, in fact, arise when people lose a significant person in their lives. However, some of the constitutive aspects of the experience and its dimensions have been overlooked by research, especially when we become interested in the phenomenology of the experience.

The aim of this paper is to fill a gap in the literature by addressing the ways in which loneliness can affect our self-experience. For this, I draw on the findings of a qualitative study that explores the nature of experiences of loneliness and solitude (Motta and Larkin 2022). The study follows a growing tradition of phenomenology engaging with qualitative research. In line with what Stiles proposes (Stiles

2007)¹ the study was planned as theory-building qualitative research. In contrast to methods that are hypothesis-testing, which are limited to the confirmation or rejection of a specific statement, exploratory qualitative research can contribute to the very construction and development of a theory.

Based on the results of this study, loneliness was not always directed at the perceived absence of specific people. The results emerging from the data included themes of loss of other people as well as loss of experience; participants identified the loss of an aspect of their own selves, and even their own sense of selves. I suggested that the experience of absence may be an important, encompassing aspect of loneliness but loneliness includes experiencing different kinds of absences. And this may well include, but extend beyond, prior accounts of the absence of 'social goods' in loneliness (see Roberts and Krueger 2021) to implicate absented aspects of self-experience itself.

How is it possible to understand loneliness as a disruption of self? In this paper, I first review the relationship between self and other from a classic phenomenological perspective. Then, I present the results of a qualitative study on loneliness and solitude highlighting the how different dimensions of the self can be affected by it. Lastly, I argue that the experience of absence is related to absented parts of the self and that this is a fundamental disruption of self-experience.

2 Self and Other

The concept of the 'self' is central to philosophical discussions surrounding identity and consciousness. Analyses range from primarily focusing on the individual first-person perspective or subjective experience, to considering the intricate ways in which the self interacts with, and is shaped by, the 'other'. An understanding of the self in its interplay with the other moves the focus from subjectivity to the broader realm of intersubjectivity.

The shift from a purely subjective analysis of the self to an intersubjective one requires a closer examination of how the other can influence and shape our sense of identity. Zahavi (2015) argues that selfhood is both innate and transformed through social interaction. In this line of thought our primary experience of the world is inherently intersubjective in so far as we do not first experience ourselves in isolation and then encounter others. Instead, our very sense of self emerges in a world already populated by others. These others are not just passive elements in our world but play a vital role in shaping our experience and understanding of self.

¹ For other examples of the use of IPA for theory building see Galbusera et al. 2019.

The relationship between self-awareness and the role of the other is a central concern in existential thought. Through the works of Sartre, Mead, and Husserl, we can discern various interpretations of how the self is constituted in relation to others and how one's perception of self is influenced by the external gaze. While Sartre, Mead, and Husserl each approach the topic in distinct ways, the common theme across their works, as Zahavi argues, is the influence of the other on self-perception and identity formation.

The different perspectives offered by these authors on the constitution of the self are described in relation to the opposition between subject and object, and the self in relation to the other. For Sartre, the gaze of the other acts as a transformative agent in self-awareness. When observed by another, one is not just a conscious subject but also becomes an object in the observer's world. This awareness stems from the conflict between our desire for pure subjectivity and the acknowledgment of our object status in another's realm. This duality is evidenced in Sartre's analysis of shame in *Being and Nothingness*, suggesting that through the gaze of the other, one's spatial-temporal self-perception is altered, pushing one from a subjective centre to a defined position in the world. In the quote mentioned previously, Sartre expressed: "Pierre is absent from the whole cafe; his absence fixes the cafe in its evanescence [...]. Pierre's absence supposes an original relation between me and this café." (Sartre, 1962, p. 9) This highlights not only that my relationship with the world is mediated by the other but also that my own experience of myself in it can be affected by the other.

Mead (1962) offers a distinct lens, proposing that self-hood is fundamentally about becoming an object to oneself. This self-objectification, according to Mead, occurs indirectly by adopting the attitudes and perspectives of others. It emphasizes that self-awareness and self-construction are deeply rooted in a social environment, wherein the views of others shape one's own perception of self.

Husserl (1982) delves into a form of self-consciousness where one is aware of being perceived by another. This form of self-consciousness is characterized by my experience of the other as experiencing myself. As Zahavi puts it: "Husserl describes this situation as involving a kind of iterative or higher-order empathy, and claims that my realization that I can be given for the other in the same way as the other is given for me leads to an important transformation in my self-apprehension. It is through this process of other-mediated self-experience, whereby I indirectly experience myself as one viewed by others, that I, for instance, come to experience myself as human." (Zahavi 2015, p. 256).

Sartre's analysis of shame offers a lens through which he delves into the intricate relationship between the subject and the object. This exploration reveals a form of alienation

that emerges when one becomes an object of another's perception. Although this perspective on alienation differs from the perspective I am presenting on loneliness, both experiences can illuminate our examination on the self, each in their own way. More precisely, just as shame can serve as a means to discuss how the self can be viewed as an object in another's perspective, loneliness may do its part to help us explore how one's self-experience can be internally disrupted. Drawing parallels, just as Sartre utilized the analysis of shame to dissect the duality of the self – its subjective and objective facets – and Husserl's views on empathy suggest a potentiality for perceiving humanity, loneliness may serve a similar purpose in our exploration, offering profound insights into our understanding of self-experience, and shedding light on the ways that it can be disrupted.

Our understanding of ourselves can also be as much about our subjective experience as it is about our physical being, personal narratives or our interactions and place within societal structures. The self can be influenced by a myriad of interactions.

Gallagher (2013) argues that the self includes several dimensions including the bodily self, the narrative self, and the social self. These are just three of the different dimensions that are interacting in the constitution of the self in relation with the other. They are useful for sharpening our focus on the different aspects of loneliness that we will be looking at in the rest of the paper. The narrative dimension of our self is profoundly influenced by the stories we tell about our own experiences. These stories significantly shape our self-awareness and enrich our self-perception, yet they do not represent its entirety. Another integral facet of our identity is rooted in our bodily experiences. It is not merely about the physicality of our body, but how we interpret and perceive bodily sensations. This embodied perception provides a foundational anchor to our sense of self in the tangible world. Gallagher also emphasizes the inextricable link between our self-conception and our social interactions. The feedback and relationships we establish with others play an indispensable role in our self-understanding.

In the next section I present a research project that investigates the phenomenology of loneliness and solitude. The rationale behind the qualitative methodology that was used, and the results of the study have been presented in full in another paper (Motta & Larkin, 2022). In what follows, I first consider how the qualitative data from the study can be integrated to and discussed within this paper's philosophical, phenomenological framework. After that, I present the results of the study. The intention is to focus on the results that show where loneliness and the different dimensions of the self meet. For that, I only aim at conveying where in the themes that emerged from the study we can see a connection

between loneliness and the self, without going into the details of each sub-theme.

3 Integrating Qualitative Data

Recently, there has been a surge in the adoption of qualitative methods that study first-person experiences, aiming to understand the depths of diverse phenomena.² Beyond merely capturing an individual's experience, qualitative research has long been esteemed for its capacity to provide depth and detail. Stiles (2009) emphasizes the significant role that case studies play, especially within the fields of counselling and psychotherapy. They offer a holistic representation of therapeutic narratives, painting a complete picture of the individual's experience. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research method that studies lived experiences. The methodology aligns with the principles offered by Stiles. That is, researchers select comprehensive case studies that offer a broad perspective on the subject matter while using a multi-dimensional approach to verify their data sources. What this means is that case studies emphasize the importance of narrative, allowing researchers to understand an individual's experience from their unique perspective. This is because usually case studies provide a granular view, digging into the particulars of each therapeutic journey, from the struggles and challenges faced by the participant to their moments of insight and transformation. Using IPA for this very same reason in our study on loneliness has provided a more profound understanding of the topic. Moreover, through its emphasis on the first-person viewpoint, IPA can accentuate and deepen a phenomenological analysis. The strength of IPA lies in its focus on the subjective, bringing the essence of experiences to the forefront. The interpretative nature of IPA aligns perfectly with the phenomenological principle of recognizing the mutual understanding built between the experiencer and the interpreter.

Empirical data can have a role in philosophical phenomenological theory. It may provide significant value in shaping philosophical phenomenological theories as it provides tangible evidence, either supporting or challenging philosophical insights. David Katz (1925/1989), for instance, integrated phenomenological approaches in his studies on touch and color perception. He focused on real-world perceptual experiences, differentiating between types of touch and challenging prevalent theories on colour perception. His unique methodological approach integrated introspective, phenomenological, and experimental techniques, placing importance on everyday perceptual experiences rather

than abstract stimuli typically used in research labs. In touch studies, Katz differentiated between “surface touch” and “deep touch”, underscoring the role of active touch in our haptic perception.

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), our study on loneliness systematically examined individual lived experiences. And by integrating these empirical findings into our philosophical framework, in this paper I offer an evidence-based exploration of loneliness and aim to enhance the depth and precision of the philosophical discourse on loneliness.

3.1 Loneliness as Disruption of Self-Experience

Loneliness can profoundly alter how individuals perceive both themselves and their surroundings. When we study it considering the different dimensions of the self, we gain more clarity of how exactly it is that experiences are affected. Furthermore, we can identify different environmental factors, beyond just human connection, that can influence feelings of loneliness. Psychiatrist Frieda Fromm-Reichmann characterizes *real loneliness* as: “A private, emotional, non-communicable and disintegrative experience that due to its anxiety arousing quality obstructs even the person's empathic abilities and renders her to feel emotionally helpless and paralyzed, ultimately leading to psychotic states.” (Fromm-Reichmann, 1959, p. 312) This points to wide range of effects that loneliness may have. It affects not only human interactions very deeply but also a person's emotions, psyche, capacity to empathize and may even their physical motility.³

3.2 Investigating Loneliness

After completing training and under the guidance of psychology researchers, I employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as detailed by Smith et al. (2009). IPA delves into the wider context in which this experience emerges and considers the researcher's perspectives and biases. Grounded in a philosophical perspective, understanding another's experience becomes a collaborative endeavour between the researcher and participant (Smith et al. 2009).

Situated within the context of a broader area of study of phenomenology and relationships for this investigation, participants were asked about their experiences of loneliness and solitude. Participants engaged in one-on-one interviews which were recorded and transcribed. I interviewed all six participants about their experiences, with the average

² For recent research on this tradition see Høffding et al. (2023) and Slatman et al. (2016).

³ Indeed, in her essay, Fromm-Reichmann (1959) uses the word ‘paralyzed’ in the literal sense of the word as she observed a patient whose hands mobility, she argues, were affected by extreme loneliness.

interview lasting 90 min. Given the study's focus on the phenomenology of loneliness, attention was also given to whether participants perceived changes in their bodily experiences. The interviews were conversational and centered on what the participants' considered to be relevant experiences. To ensure richness in the responses, participants were encouraged to anchor their answers in concrete examples or detailed descriptions of pivotal moments. The objective was to understand people's experience of loneliness, analysing the specific language they use to describe their perceived realities. The choice of IPA as methodological tool proved invaluable. While loneliness might be universally recognized, its interpretation and actual experience are invariably influenced by the context in which it arises. Hence, IPA is especially apt when the intent is to comprehend not just the broader themes of an experience, but also the distinct viewpoints arising from an individual's unique relation to the topic.

Questions were framed to elicit detailed descriptions of what the world is like for someone who is experiencing loneliness and aimed at eliciting descriptions about the person's internal states and their relation to their world. Participants responded to open-ended general questions, such as "Could you share a moment when you felt lonely?" as well as to prompts designed to guide them to elaborate on the details of their feelings and sensations. While exploring personal narratives, it is important to acknowledge that multiple factors – whether personal, relational, or contextual – can shape one's recollection and portrayal of experiences. Therefore, these influencing elements were consistently considered.

IPA typically requires a degree of homogeneity within the sample, given its emphasis on in-depth exploration of a relatively limited sample size and its focus on contextual understanding via a shared experience perspective.

The participants were six religious women, all residing in or near a convent in central England. They belong to an order known for its longstanding tradition of offering education to the underprivileged, and assistance to marginalized communities across England, Eastern Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa. I have provided some reasons for choosing from this group (Motta & Larkin, 2022; Motta & Bortolotti, 2020) But what exactly about this group can provide insights on the topic of the self?

In exploring the relationship between the self and the other, it's crucial to dive into the tapestry of human experiences, this includes those rooted in religion. William James (1902) accentuated the transformative essence of personal religious experiences in his empirical approach to religion. He remarked on their profound impact on human life. Such religious experiences, as James argued, can offer significant insights into the complexities of human connections (James, 1897). When we

do the exercise of considering what intersubjectivity would be when the other is a transcendental being, this can lead to profound insights into what intersubjectivity with another human is.

Exploring the lived experiences of religious women had the potential for unveiling nuanced layers of the interplay between the self and the other in ways that other contexts could not reveal. Edith Stein (1989/1917; 2000; 2002), was another inspiration for choosing this group. Rooted in her spiritual life, her views unveiled a unique phenomenological perspective on the relationship between the self and the other. Stein portrayed the self as dynamically intertwined with the world and with other individuals. She defines empathy as the deep acknowledgment and understanding of another's unique experiences, serving as a conduit to authentic human interaction. The idea of the other providing a unique perspective and the importance of this recognition in order to get as close as we can to understanding them is also in line with the principles of IPA.

3.3 The Study

Following the guidelines provided by Smith et al. (2009), I conducted the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). After multiple reviews of the transcripts for familiarity, initial coding revealed emerging themes, which encompassed descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual observations. These themes were then categorized into broader themes for each interview. Individual interviews were analyzed, after which themes across them were interconnected. This process illuminated seven predominant master themes consistently evident across all participant responses.

For rigorous interpretation, the final analysis phase involved cross-referencing each theme with its corresponding textual quotations. Abiding by the "interpretation from within" philosophy (Smith et al. 2009), all interpretations during the analysis were compared against the originating narrative. The final interpretation was grounded in participants' expressed thoughts, avoiding external theories or biases. To maintain transparency, a comprehensive analytical record was maintained, allowing tracing from the transcript to the overarching themes and vice versa. This systematic approach enables researchers to independently validate the analytical accuracy.

While these themes were multifaceted, spanning the diverse descriptions of the different experiences involved, the final analytical focus was primarily on the feeling of absence experienced as a consequence of feeling prevented from experiencing oneself. In what follows I develop this idea further. I present the summary of themes and only go in detail with the themes that help illustrate the disruption of self.

4 Summary of Themes and Relation to the Self

The analysis points to loneliness as a deeply felt distressing experience of absence, which also prevents one from fully experiencing oneself. I presented this via the following five main themes:

1. *Loneliness as a deeply felt distressing experience of absence;*
- 2a. *Absence as a loss of Possibilities to act, to Share, to Experience*
- 2b. *Absence Arising from a Feeling of Being out of step*
3. *The Disrupted self*
4. *The role of others: not being seen, not being heard.*
5. *When Loneliness ends: Getting back to ‘the Rhythm of life’; ‘settling’ and Finding Peace*

In this section, I will delve into the themes in connection with aspects of the self, particularly emphasizing the dimensions outlined in Gallagher’s “Pattern Theory of Self.” (Gallagher 2013) Through this lens, I aim to both provide a nuanced understanding of how the loneliness can be seen as a disruption that permeates these various dimensions of the self, and, at the same time, use the notion of self to get more clarity on the experience of loneliness.

4.1 Loneliness as a Deeply Felt Distressing Experience of Absence

The analysis of the study indicates that loneliness is more than just the lack of company. This can be particularly evident when individuals transition from a known environment, marked by established relationships, to a new, unfamiliar one. Despite the appealing nature of the new environment, a profound sense of disorientation and loss was felt by one of the participants.⁴

The term ‘place’ suggests both a physical move and a deeper transition from a known framework of experiences to a new one. This transition was deeply emotional and was described as causing significant distress. The feelings of loneliness extended in the participants beyond missing familiar settings or friends. It was also about missing past experiences that defined the individual’s self-perception and world orientation. This was emphasized by the participants

struggle to connect and interpret the new surroundings. This change signifies more than a mere geographical shift; it represents a profound change in experiential perspective. Throughout the accounts, the ‘heart’ is frequently mentioned, serving as a metaphor for genuine emotion, identity, and depth. In this case, the former setting, the heart guided the individual, but in the new context, it felt misplaced. This emotion underscores a core aspect of loneliness experienced by many — it is an existential form of loss, resulting in a diminished sense of belonging, challenges in understanding oneself, and a reduced connection with others.

The concept of the bodily self, as delineated by Gallagher, points to our tangible experiences and corporeal presence in the world. Loneliness, in this dimension, manifests as an acute awareness of the tangible absence of familiar human interactions and surroundings. The individual grapples with pronounced bodily sensations—the palpable heavy weight, or the lack of tactile interactions. Within the realm of the social self, this absence transcends the mere lack of company. It reflects a profound existential sentiment—a sense of disconnection or non-belonging to a community or social collective. There is a heightened, almost tangible, perception of absence, and the person’s social identity wanes, as loneliness deepens. In relation to the narrative self, we discern disruptions in the familiar stories. Even a change of daily routines can provoke this in some cases. The individual’s life narrative may be perceived as lacking continuity and, in some cases, coherence.

4.2 Being Unable to Act, Communicate, to Experience

Participants in the study reported specific episodes of loneliness that were intensely felt and easily remembered, occurring within distinct timeframes. These moments were characterized by their exact beginning and the emotions they evoked. A defining trait of these episodes was a heightened perception of absence. The initiation of such absences could often be tied to challenges in potential actions or communication. For example, a participant felt isolated due to unfamiliarity with a new environment.

Another participant’s account highlights difficulties in communication. This could be due to challenges like someone ignoring them or facing linguistic barriers in a foreign setting, leading to feelings of being silenced and disconnected.

One participant’s perspective on the importance of connection was unique among the study subjects. Recognizing what prevents forming connections is central to comprehending loneliness. Various emotional states and circumstances can hinder these connections. This participant, who describes herself as typically happy, shared instances where

⁴ From the transcript: Bertha: I went from a place where I was managing and enjoying things to a new place that didn’t have the old friends again and the old experience, totally new. And again the pain in my heart and I remember saying to one of the sisters after a week of being there. I said: ‘Oh, it’s a beautiful country and everybody is so nice. But I’ll never settle.’ And that was absolutely true then. And I couldn’t see anything, couldn’t see myself. And I should have remembered the way back when I had that first big break again that made me heartbroken. But it didn’t, you know my rationale was here I was now.

language barriers and feelings of distress acted as impediments to communication.⁵

Such challenges were faced not only in foreign lands but also when she was not free to express herself.

What is important to convey here is that not all situations causing negative emotions result in feelings of loneliness. Another participant's experience of aiding a troubled friend, while difficult, did not evoke loneliness.

This understanding enhances the concept of loneliness, as conveyed by the participants. In the described experience, the consistent factor was not just the negative emotions, but how they prevented the participant from fully connecting or understanding her place. An episode becomes an experience of absence when it prevents aspects of one's self-identity from being recognized and embraced. This intricate distinction between mere negative feelings and those leading to loneliness will be delved into deeper in the following theme on the disruption of self.

From the perspective of the bodily self, loneliness can impair one's ability to physically express oneself. In environments alien to one's essence, gestures, touch, or facial expressions become stifled, hindering the body's innate language of connection. In the dimension of the social self, barriers—be they linguistic, cultural, or contextual—obstruct the fluency of social connection. The individual stands on the periphery, unable to fully engage or integrate, leading to a diminished social identity. And, in terms of the narrative self, the inability to articulate, resonate with, or share personal experiences truncates one's life story. The individual's narrative becomes fragmented, or the person loses her sense of identity as the narrative is unclear.

4.3 Being Out of Sync

Loneliness can intensify when individuals feel out of step or out of sync with their environment. This could be attributed to a temporal mismatch or a spatial incongruity. Feeling out of synchronization with one's surroundings emerged as a prevalent feeling among study participants. They highlighted the transition from a familiar setting to a completely unfamiliar environment in different ways.⁶ For instance, Bertha expresses this in the following way: "It was about what my heart had left back here and it was all gone. And then it takes a while for things to catch up and settle." This quote exemplifies the connection between loss and the feeling of

being 'out of step' or out of rhythm with one's environment. Another participant detailed the profound loneliness experienced due to joining an institution late, missing the initial bonding and settling phase, which emphasized the sense of not being in sync with the institution's rhythm. Sometimes the institution's rhythms are described as intertwined with moods.⁷

Spatial differences also amplify the feeling of being out of step. The contrasting experiences of being in two different geographical settings, one described as 'near' and 'cold' and the other as 'far' and 'hot', highlight this. A compelling description of this desynchronization comes from a participant who shared the loneliness felt during a festive celebration in a new environment. The stark difference in climate during the festivity, along with the unfamiliar context, amplified the sense of being out of place. Notably, the experience of loneliness persisted even in the company of others, highlighting that loneliness isn't solely about the absence of human connection but also about environmental misalignment. While participants might not have explicitly stated this, analysis indicates that these feelings of desynchronization might be operating subconsciously, influencing their perceptions and emotions. One narrative touches upon the challenge of reconciling internal feelings with an external environment. This contrast between internal perception and external reality (reflected in phrases such as: "I would endure this beauty [in the landscape outside] and this pain [as experienced inside]" was a recurrent theme across the accounts.

From another participant's perspective, adjusting to new surroundings was not just about missing familiar faces but about an inability to recognize oneself in an unfamiliar context. This made her feel invisible. Meanwhile, another participant, despite having material comforts, experienced deep loneliness stemming from a disconnect between external life and an inner calling. Participant's stories often emphasize that loneliness can stem from not just the absence of companionship but from a disconnect with one's inner self or purpose. What emerged clearly from the data is that loneliness can arise when there is a misalignment between one's environment, actions, and innermost feelings or aspirations.

This overarching sense of "absence" points to potential within oneself that remains unexplored or unfulfilled.

We can infer that in the bodily dimension of the self, loneliness can manifest as a discord between one's inherent rhythms (such as, for instance, circadian patterns) and the external environment. This discordance renders the individual feeling dislocated, an entity out of sync with its surroundings. From the vantage of the social self, divergent

⁵ From the transcript: Sophia: I'm a jolly person. I need to laugh; I need to joke. It's inbred in me. And I think that's what might have been ... I did get upset as I told you at the novitiate a few times. But I was scrupulous, and I knew I had to get rid of that because that is wrong, that's pride you see.

⁶ See e.g., footnote 4; from the transcript: Michael: I was the first one to break the family.

⁷ From the transcript: Bertha: And you saw, there are different moods. And the joyful bits: the school gala, the weekends going home and coming back and again everybody down.

social norms or unfamiliar daily rhythms can amplify feelings of alienation. An individual grapples with the complexities of navigating a terrain of unfamiliar social paradigms, further alienating their social identity. Lastly, considering the narrative self, when life's events deviate from one's internal script or anticipated storyline, there is a disjunction. The continuity of one's personal chronicle is disrupted, and the narrative self finds itself astray.

4.4 The Role of Others: Not Being Seen, not Being Heard

A common theme for most participants underscores the intrinsic human need for our experiences to be acknowledged by others. The simple act of being recognized or listened to by another can foster a feeling of connection. One participant's narrative exemplifies this notion.

Augusta: I suppose when my father died I thought... yeah there was a sense of real loneliness then. Cause I felt very connected to him... And then he was gone and my mother was grieving, and everybody was grieving and nobody's looked at my grief. And I thought: "who was there to pick up my grief? But there wasn't anybody, cause everybody is grieving... I guess [loneliness is] when you grieve and nobody looks at your grief.

For this participant, the anguish of a significant loss was magnified by the sensation that, amidst numerous mourners, her personal grief went unnoticed. Every person seemed preoccupied with their own pain, making her feel as if her emotions went unseen. This illustrates the sensation of loneliness even amidst other people, especially when one's feelings and experiences are not recognized or resonated with by others.

Interestingly, this feeling of loneliness is not solely due to personal loss but also arises from the absence of an avenue to articulate, showcase, and validate these emotions. Participants noted varying levels of connection with different people. With some, there might be a sense of reservation, leading to selective sharing and only revealing certain parts of oneself. Conversely, with other people, there may be an inherent trust and mutual understanding, facilitating the sharing of profound vulnerabilities. Here is the social self that resonates strongly with this dimension. Not only our roles, responsibilities, and our place within our community are shaped by mutual recognition. When our experiences go unnoticed or unacknowledged, our sense of belonging and our very identity within the community becomes uncertain.⁸

⁸ Lucas (2019) for a political theory perspective on the effects of not being seen or heard. Lucas explores Arendt's phenomenology of

There is more to this theme as it because it is precisely here where the theoretical split between absence of other and absence of self can be made. I return to this in the last section.

4.5 The Disrupted Self

This theme encapsulates the disorientation experienced by individuals when they were in unfamiliar surroundings, struggling to understand their position, their purpose and, more importantly, their sense of self. One participant described their younger days in a bustling city, enjoying the perks of urban life, far from their humble beginnings. But amidst the thrills of city life, a profound sensation of isolation and self-dissatisfaction persisted. She lived a life rich in experiences but felt empty, overshadowed by the realization that she was drifting away from a deeper calling. Fundamentally, these narratives highlight the unsettling feeling of not being able to align with or express an essential part of oneself. While some participants struggled with unfamiliar surroundings, others faced an internal conflict between their current life and an unrealized purpose.⁹ These stories underline that feelings of loneliness are not just about lacking social interactions but are also deeply linked with unexplored parts of one's identity. Such complex interactions warrant further exploration in future discussions.

Thus, feelings of loneliness seem to serve as an indicator, pointing to a disparity between an individual's inner world and their external surroundings or situations. The path from loneliness to contentment involves recognizing this disparity, adjusting to life's rhythm, and ultimately discovering one's genuine purpose. Examining the bodily self, there is a disconnect amid familiarity. Here is the paradoxical feeling of overwhelming sense of distance, even when surrounded by a multitude. The attention is away from

loneliness as the total loss of the common world "the state in which one is incapable of being an interlocutor, through thought, speech, or action, with others and, ultimately, incapable of appearing as an individual to others" (Lucas 2019).

⁹ From the transcript: Juliana: This was my first time away from home in [a] big city and I was brought up in [the] country. But this feeling very quickly disappeared after a while. [...] I had everything I wanted. I could do whatever I liked, I had my own money and I had total freedom and I could go to dances and pictures and could do whatever I liked.[...] My loneliness was ... I was living a great life and I knew it wasn't enough. That the life I was called to was something that I would find much more difficult. And I had a sense of letting myself down. You know what I mean? It wasn't exactly. It was...let me say, disappointment with myself... Because, I should have joined the convent and I didn't. And I felt disappointment with myself. My ego was a little bit battered, as a young person. Because, here I was, this was all outside me, all these good works and everything that I was doing and then inside. I wasn't with myself inside, I wasn't myself. Because I wasn't really doing what I felt in my head I should be doing.

the tactile feedback, which typically grounds and orients the bodily self. In the case of the social self, the absence of acknowledgment or understanding in one's social landscape. An individual's social identity is estranged, as there is no feedback from others to affirm it. As for the narrative self, disruptions in life narratives become evident. The individual struggles to weave recent experiences into the overarching tapestry of their life, resulting in a fragmented and disjointed sense of self.

5 From Absence of Other to Disruption of Self

Earlier literature, as mentioned, classifies loneliness into three attentional dimensions: intimate (absence of close personal connections), relational (absence of wider social interactions), and collective (absence of a broader social identity or community). These dimensions focus primarily on relationships or social connections, be it close personal ones, broader societal ones, or connections to a collective community identity.

While the traditional classification highlights loneliness as the absence of other people in one's life, the present study's findings reveal that loneliness might not always be about the absence of others. Instead, it can emerge from a perceived absence of experiences, roles, or even aspects of oneself. An essential insight is that loneliness can arise from the loss or absence that is felt due to feeling prevented from undergoing an experience.

Our understanding of these results can be expanded when we consider the notion of absence and its relation to the concept of "appearance" for Husserl. As Roberto Walton argues (Walton 2015), Husserl proposes an intricate relationship between appearance and absence challenges traditional epistemological dichotomies of presence/absence or appearance/reality. For Husserl, the meaning of an object (or any phenomenon) is not just about its immediate appearance, but also involves the larger context – including what is not immediately seen or present. For Husserl (1913/1982), appearance is not about illusion or mere semblance, but rather about the way things present themselves to consciousness. This is fundamental to his concept of "phenomenon" – literally, "that which shows itself."

Things never show themselves in totality. Any given object, for example, has an infinity of perspectives or profiles, which Husserl calls "adumbrations." When you look at a physical object, like a cup, you only see one side or angle of it at a time. The other sides, although not visible, are still implicated in your experience of the cup. This leads to the understanding that presence and absence are intertwined in our conscious experience. The unseen adumbrations of the

cup (the sides that are hidden from view) are absent in one sense, but they are implied by the present perspective. There is an interplay of appearance and non-appearance at work. Husserl (1928/1964) uses the notion of "horizon" to capture this idea. The "horizon" refers to all the possible experiences and adumbrations surrounding an object that are not directly given to consciousness but are nonetheless implicated in its experience. In other words, what is absent (or on the horizon) contributes to the meaning of what is present.

What are the implications for our study on loneliness and the type of disruption it represents on the self? The absence experienced in loneliness and the consequential disruption of self is directly connected to instances in which specific aspects of the self cannot be displayed in the world or communicated to others. In this sense, more than the absence of others the self undergoes an experience of absence of her own self. That is, in loneliness, the experience of absence is related to a disruption of self because our way of being together and understanding each other is co-determined in its meaning by our interactions with others and the situations in which we find ourselves in the world. When our perception of this situation is affected by different changes in the environment, this has a direct impact on our own possibilities of being. If, following Husserl, we agree that we perceive our environments as multi-sided object based on an implicit reference to the (real or potential) perceptual perspectives of others on the same things, this includes the perceptions that others can have of our actions as expressions of aspects of ourselves in the world. Just like everything else in the world, aspects of myself can be experienced by others in perception. And this is part of the apperceptive horizon of possible perceptions. What happens in loneliness is that when others fail to see aspects of me, my own appearing is disrupted. The objectivity of the world stands intact, but some of the aspects of my own existence may not.¹⁰

Our reading of the results of the qualitative study via Gallagher's dimensions of self has shown that the experiences expressed by the participants can reflect disruptions in at least the bodily, the narrative, and the social self. In relation to where our body, our subjectivity and the other intersect, Husserl argues that an individual can access the deepest dimension of their subjectivity, where they encounter their own perceptions facilitated by their body's mobility. This bodily horizon allows for a direct, personal experience.

Through such foundational experiences, devoid of references beyond one's own body, one can begin to relate to

¹⁰ An interesting question that emerged during the writing process of this paper proposes that given that it is the case that for physical objects there is always something that is out of view from one's current perspective (the far, occluded sides of the object), Is there a possibility of there ever being an undisrupted self? A full exploration of this question exceeds the scope of this paper and deserves attention in future research.

others—primarily via empathy. Husserl proposes that the world shared by humans arises from intersubjective construction. To grasp this construction, we must set aside our preconceptions about the objective world, diving deeper than societal structures. In early writings, Husserl focuses on identifying universal structures underpinning our world's formation. He suggests every object is encircled by a horizon of other objects, each having its own horizons. The collective horizon, or universal horizon, represents the world. This world is akin to a backdrop against which figures appear. Every object has internal and external horizons, which intersect within the encompassing horizon of all horizons. This world, though conceptually vast, has specific spatial-temporal attributes and always relates to the subject (Walton 2015).

Crucially, our lived body serves as a reference point for space and time. It establishes an absolute 'here' and 'now', and every perceived object exists within spatial and temporal horizons that can expand in all directions. The perspective from which we view objects is informed by our body, particularly its movements and associated sensations, termed *kinesthesias*. Our body is central to our agency—it determines our physical perspective, our movements, and thus our understanding of objects' appearances.

Husserl emphasizes the correlation between kinesthetic experiences and sensory data. Such experiences are rooted in the notion of capability. To truly understand the world and our place in it, we must acknowledge our unique perspective—the "I can", the essence of our agency. Interpersonal relationships are intrinsic to this understanding. Our experience of the world is influenced both by our experiences and those of others. Husserl argues that the world is not purely objective or subjective. Instead, it results from intersubjectively determined consciousness, where every subject has its unique experiences and perspectives. These subjectivities can intersect, allowing for mutual understanding, primarily through empathy.¹¹

Participants in the study reported not only feeling lonely due to other people but also due to a sense of disconnect from themselves. This could be manifested as an absence of a known identity, a change in role or position, or even a profound existential feeling of not recognizing oneself. Such a dimension of loneliness hasn't been extensively discussed in traditional literature, making it a significant contribution from this study. Loneliness also often arises amidst social settings due to a perceived disconnect between one's internal state and the external environment. Participants felt that some of their experiences were not always possible unless witnessed by others, suggesting that the presence of others has an effect on one's experiences. The disruption in

self-experience in loneliness is distinct from mere awareness of existential aloneness. It can be caused by others but it primarily reflects a more structural disruption. Husserl's phenomenology positions consciousness as inherently intentional, always directed outwards towards objects and towards others. When confronted with absence of aspects of the self (as can be the case in loneliness), there is a disruption in our phenomenological horizon, revealing not just an external absence, but also an internal alteration of our conscious experience.

6 Conclusion

This paper engaged with empirical data that has been IPA-subjected in a previous study on loneliness, and deployed these insights in a phenomenological analysis that extends the notion of loneliness from lack of relationships with other people to impediments to actualize one's own self experience. This pushes the boundaries of our current understanding on loneliness and suggests that interventions to address loneliness should not just focus on building social connections but also on bridging the gaps in personal experiences and self-identity.

6.1 Limitations

The exploratory nature of this study on loneliness should be acknowledged. While the sample size is appropriate for an in-depth IPA analysis (which emphasizes prototypical over statistical generalization), a replication with a larger sample size is essential to validate the findings. In this paper, I have primarily concentrated on specific dimensions of loneliness, and other facets of the IPA analysis, such as factors that might mitigate or exacerbate the feeling, have been omitted. A more exhaustive exploration of these factors would offer a comprehensive understanding of loneliness. Additionally, having detailed information about the participants, including their social backgrounds and mental health history, would have been beneficial to contextualize the findings. Regrettably, due to the preliminary nature of this study, some data was either incomplete or unavailable. Practical constraints also made a post-hoc respondent validation unfeasible, which would have otherwise fortified the reliability of the results and further engaged the participants. We anticipate these insights will guide and enhance future research in this area.

Acknowledgements I thank everyone who offered comments on previous drafts.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing,

¹¹ I will not extend on the discussion on empathy in this paper although it may be relevant to another discussion on loneliness.

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 licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence 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. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Cacioppo JT, Cacioppo S, Capitanio JP, Cole SW (2015) The neuroendocrinology of social isolation. *Ann Rev Psychol* 66:733–767
- Cacioppo JT, Patrick W (2008) Loneliness: human nature and the need for social connection. W. W. Norton & Company
- Fromm-Reichmann F (1959) Loneliness *Psychiatry* 22:1–15
- Gallbusera L, Fellin L, Fuchs T (2019) Towards the recovery of a sense of self: an interpretative phenomenological analysis of patients' experience of body-oriented psychotherapy for schizophrenia. *Psychother Res* 29(2):234–250
- Gallagher S (2013) A pattern theory of self. *Front Hum Neurosci* 7:443
- Høffding S, Heimann K, Martiny K (2023) Working with others' experience. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 22(1):1–24
- Husserl E (1964) In: Churchill JS (ed) *The phenomenology of internal time-consciousness*. Trans.). Indiana University Press. (Original work edited 1928)
- Husserl, E (1982). *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy* (F. Kersten, Trans.). Martinus Nijhoff. (Original work published 1913)
- James W (1897) *The Will to believe and other essays in Popular Philosophy*. Longmans, Green, and Co, New York
- James W (1902) *The varieties of Religious Experience*. Longmans, Green, and Co, New York
- Katz D (1925/1989) *The world of colour*. Kegan Paul, London. (Original work published 1925)
- Lucas SD (2019) Loneliness and appearance: toward a concept of ontological agency. *Eur J Philos* 27(3):709–722
- Mead GH (1962) *Mind, self, and society*. University of Chicago Press
- Motta V (2021) Key Concept: loneliness. *Philosophy, Psychiatry & Psychology*
- Motta V, Bortolotti L (2020) Solitude as a positive experience. *Empowerment and Agency*. Methodo
- Motta V, Larkin M (2022) Absence of other and disruption of self: an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the meaning of loneliness in the context of life in a religious community. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*
- Peplau LA, Miceli M, Morasch B (1979) Loneliness and satisfaction with life. In: Peplau LA, Perlman D (eds) *Loneliness: a sourcebook of current theory, research, and therapy*. John Wiley & Sons, pp 123–134
- Peplau LA, Perlman D (1982) *Loneliness: a sourcebook of current theory, research, and therapy*. John Wiley & Sons
- Roberts T, Krueger J (2021) Loneliness and the emotional experience of absence. *South J Philos* 59:185–204
- Sartre JP (1943) *Being and nothingness: an essay on phenomenological ontology*. Philosophical Library
- Sartre JP (1962) *The Reprieve* (E. Sutton, trans.). Penguin
- Slatman J, Halsema A, Meershoek A (2016) Responding to scars after breast Surgery. *Qual Health Res* 26(12):1614–1626
- Smith JA, Flowers P, Larkin M (2009) *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: theory, method and research*. Sage
- Stein E (2000) In: Baseheart MC, Sawicki M (eds) *Philosophy of psychology and the humanities*. ICS Publications, Trans.). Washington, D.C.
- Stein E (2002) *Finite and Eternal being: an attempt at an ascent to the meaning of being*. ICS Publications, Washington, D.C.
- Stein E, Stein W (1989) Trans.). Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications. (Original work published 1917)
- Stiles WB (2007) *Theory-building case studies of counselling and psychotherapy*. Counselling and Psychotherapy Research 7(2):122–127
- Tietjen R, Furtak R (2021) Loneliness, love, and the limits of language. *The Southern*
- Walton R (2015) *Intencionalidad Y Horizonticidad*. Editorial Aula de Humanidades, Universidad de San Buenaventura Cali, Bogotá
- Zahavi D (2015) Self and other: from pure ego to co-constituted we. *Cont Philos Rev* 48(2):143–160

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.