

DESCRIPTIONS OF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PAINFUL LONELINESS
AND COMFORTABLE ALONENESS

by

TRACY MELANIE LAKE

submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

SUPERVISOR: DR I FERNS

JOINT SUPERVISOR: MRS D M FLOWERS

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Summary

This study investigated the differences between descriptions of the lived experiences of painful loneliness and comfortable aloneness. Loneliness, is documented as a modern-day social problem, associated with psychic pain and suffering and myriad mental and physical health problems. Uncomplicated, comfortable or neutral aloneness, is scarce in the literature, with allusions to the possibility that people may never feel lonely. The 'essences' of the experience of painful loneliness have been gathered from the literature, while the 'essences' of the experience of comfortable aloneness have been gathered interviews with five people who are comfortable or ambivalent about their aloneness. The qualitative methods of heuristic and phenomenological research have been used to interpret and make sense of the raw data generated. It was found that the subjective experiences of aloneness and loneliness are fundamentally different, and that the thoughts, meanings and realities associated with either state are similarly disparate.

Key terms

lived experiences, painful loneliness, comfortable aloneness, solitude, constructed meanings, qualitative research, rich descriptions, heuristic, phenomenological

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The five people who shared their memories, experiences and reflections on that part of their lives that they have lived alone.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Now no-one's knocked upon my door
For a thousand years or more
All made up and nowhere to go
Welcome to this one man show
Just take a seat they're always free
No surprise no mystery
In this theater that I call my soul
I always play the starring role.

So lonely.

- The Police - *So lonely*

1.1 Introduction

In the author's years of reading psychotherapy and psychopathology texts the prevalence of loneliness, and its exasperating effect on the human experience of emotional pain, have made a strong impression on her. The earliest quote that comes to mind is that from Nathan Ackerman's paper (cited in Geurin, 1976, p.4) in the 1937 Bulletin of the Kansas Mental Hygiene Society, which reads that "None of us live our lives utterly alone. Those of us who try are doomed to a miserable existence".

The truth of many people's lived experiences, however, may turn out to be that of the very lonely. Our modern society, along with all of the changes that have gone hand in hand with the values, drives and goals that we have created for ourselves, often ends up stressing a lifestyle of disconnection from most other people around us. The particularly Western emphasis on individuation and independence has tended to draw people away from each other, and to engender a dominant theme of competitiveness in place of the co-operation that may have coloured previous generations.

Many authors describe mankind as social beings who need and desire to have other people around, and to have meaningful relationships with them (Hritzuk, 1982; Leveté, 1993; Rubenstein & Shaver, 1974). Haley (1959, p. 195) writes that "Every human being depends upon other people not only for his survival but for his pleasure and pain". From this point we could argue that people need to have other people around, not only to facilitate optimal levels of development and functioning, but also to allow

them a full experience of the gamut of human emotions that might accompany aloneness or companionship. In this study the differences between the lived experiences of painful loneliness and comfortable aloneness, as emotive responses to being alone, will be investigated.

1.2 Loneliness research in perspective

Loneliness as a research topic was poorly represented in the professional literature until roughly the 1960's and 1970's. In the fields of psychology, psychiatry and sociology loneliness was largely neglected and there are few sources which discuss it as a research theme, or as a lived human experience. Weiss (1973, p.2) describes how the literature at the time was "lacking in studies that would describe what loneliness is". He goes on to argue that papers which could capture the phenomenon of loneliness and increase our understanding of it would be extremely valuable for all working, or living, with it.

From that time onwards, however, loneliness picked up in popularity as a topic and many authors and researchers started producing works on it. A literature search in any university library will turn up numerous titles, from the highly academic theoretical accounts of its nature, structure and determinants to the popular psychology of self-help books which promise to help one 'wage the war' against loneliness. In the final decades of the last century, therefore, the pain of loneliness does seem to have received the recognition deserved by a condition as pervasive as it is.

It would be difficult to identify which came first: the increased interest in loneliness as a topic, or the increase in its prevalence to a level that has made it into a dominant modern day concern. Gaev (1976) portrays loneliness as something which has been a trouble to mankind since the beginning of recorded time and she suggests that loneliness is not new to our age, but rather a steadily growing problem. The same author goes on to describe her impression of how the pain of loneliness seems to be somehow greater today than it was in past times. Gaev argues that people currently consider loneliness to be more aberrant and intolerable than they used to, such that it has now earned itself a very bad reputation and people experience even more anxiety around it than previously. The author's study may find answers, through its investigation of comfortably alone individuals' lived experiences, for the pain of many lonely people.

1.3 Painful loneliness

Loneliness can be abstractly defined as a state of being, instead of simply a feeling or emotion, which is most often associated with psychic pain and other negative emotions (Wildman, 1998). Many people fear the likelihood of its possibly happening to them, or endure the experience of it with such hopelessness and demotivation that they find they can never shrug it off. It is within the uncanny nature of loneliness that it can be accompanied by both a driving need and search for company and simultaneously the lack of skills, energy and confidence to do anything about it.

Gaev (1976) understands loneliness to be the feelings experienced when a person's need for relatedness with some aspect of the world is frustrated. She believes that people can experience loneliness of the inner self, physical loneliness, emotional loneliness, social loneliness and spiritual loneliness. Saddler (Ferns, 1988) subscribes to a similar set of five dimensions of loneliness. Both of these authors allow for loneliness to be perceived of as the lack or loss of a desired relationship with more aspects of our world than just other people, as loneliness has been understood by other researchers (Hritzuk, 1982; Von Witzleben, 1968; Weiss, 1973).

This study will approach comfortable aloneness from the broader definition of loneliness that allows for various different 'needs for relatedness' in the human experience. These dimensions of relatedness, and possible ensuing loneliness, may help to explain how it is possible for people who live alone to not feel lonely as long as they have satisfied some other need for relatedness. The research participants of this study, all of whom claim to feel comfortable or neutral in their aloneness, may be protected from the experience of painful loneliness by their strong relatedness to themselves, or to God, for instance.

Much of the research on loneliness has concentrated on quantitative measures of its nature, incidence and general picture. There are descriptions of the types of loneliness, the structure of loneliness and the causes of loneliness (broken down primarily into precipitating and maintaining factors). There are also publications on the typical populations of lonely people, and the gender and culture differences in loneliness, all of which are related to the above aspects of cause, type and structure of loneliness. The effects that loneliness has on people are discussed (Murphy & Kupshik, 1992; Rotenberg & Flood, 1999, Rubenstein & Shaver, 1974), along with many suggestions of self-help and therapeutic methods for overcoming, or coping with, loneliness (Gaev, 1976; Leveté, 1993; Pothoff, 1976).

Descriptions of the painful experience of loneliness can be found in the more qualitative literature on the topic of loneliness. It is depicted very well by Rouner (1998) as the 'agony of the lonely', a phrase which captures the pain, anguish, longing and discomfort of the lonely state. Pothoff (1976) reminds us that loneliness, although it is a unique and different experience for every individual, is nonetheless characterised by typical feelings of depression, anxiety, apprehension, desolation, emptiness, aimlessness, helplessness, vulnerability and desperation, amongst others. It is also often furthermore accompanied by physical "side effects" such as stress, poor health and psychosomatic problems and symptoms (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1974).

1.4 Comfortable aloneness

At the same time most of us know of at least one person who appears to feel the, frequently extremely unpleasant, emotions of loneliness much less often than others seem to do. We might postulate that these people have different ideas or feelings around what constitutes and brings on painful loneliness. Their circumstantial requirements for feeling this emotion may be much more stringent than that of other people and, therefore, seldom met. These hypotheses bring us to an interesting possibility, that some individuals' criteria for experiencing painful loneliness might never be met at all.

Suedfeld (1982) reminds us that being alone is neither necessary nor sufficient for one to feel the negative emotional state of loneliness. People can be lonely in a crowd or in the bleakness of an 'empty marriage', or, on the other side of the coin, be quite content in the company of themselves or 'mother nature'. People are differentially prone to loneliness, almost independent of their contact or lack of contact with others, and there are quite likely some people who never feel lonely at all. The aim of this study is to gather the personal descriptions of such peoples' experiences of their uncomplicated aloneness and to then compare these to the lived experience of painful loneliness.

It has been proposed that human beings actually have a biologically based and psychologically warranted need to be alone at times (Buchholz & Catton, 1999; Buchholz & Helbraun, 1999). Being on one's own is a developmental requirement for optimal human growth and for the individual to learn the skills to self-regulate his or her needs and/or emotions. Various texts describe aloneness as a very useful time of self reflection and growth which can be experienced as positive by those who are ready and able to go there (Moustakas, 1961, 1972, 1975; Wagnild & Young, 1990).

In fact, these positive descriptions of aloneness and its benefits for all people ring very close to the definitions of solitude. Buchholz and Catton (1999) maintain that people have needs to be both alone and in meaningful contact with others, and that the experience of solitude is the positive extreme of the need to be alone. Solitude is generally defined as an elected state, in which people positively and voluntarily use the time that they get to spend alone for the consolidation of self and other human growth (Natale, 1986). In solitude the emphasis is more on a very positive and enriching experience of time spent on one's own, whereas the uncomplicated aloneness that this study will concentrate on rests more on an experience of alone time which is comfortable or neutral.

1.5 Purpose of this study

The driving question of this study can be understood as a search for narratives of how it is possible for some individuals, when in the same circumstances of relative aloneness to feel comfortable or neutral while others experience varying degrees of painful loneliness. The primary interest is in how it is that being alone, occasionally for extended periods of time, is alright for some and not for others. This study aims to gather descriptions of the lived experience of comfortable aloneness from participants and to compare these to descriptions of the lived experience of painful loneliness as gathered from the literature on loneliness. It is expected that clear differences will appear between the experiences of, and meanings attributed to, either state, making it possible to identify and distinguish the individuals who experience either one or the other.

During initial inquiries for study participants on loneliness and aloneness it was difficult to decide on which participants to approach for descriptions of their personal experiences, what these stories would add to the study and with what they would be left once the research was completed. Ethical considerations about the possible impact of this study on interviewees contributed to a change in plan from comparing two groups (one painfully lonely and the other comfortably alone) to using the abundant literature for descriptions of painful loneliness and interviewees only for descriptions of comfortable or neutral aloneness.

The author's assumption here is that investigating someone's depth of pain in their loneliness might seem pathologising, and leave them feeling conflicted and without support, as the author's intention is not to offer therapy for participants after the study. Exploring comfortable aloneness, in an accepting and unchallenging way, on the other hand, might instead seem confirming and legitimising of those

participants who experience that side of the coin. In as much this study may even serve as a forum for those who live happily alone to have their experiences, meanings and associations around aloneness heard and accepted by another.

The interpretations and conclusions that this study reaches may serve to:

- Qualitatively describe, for possibly the first time, the personal lived experiences of adults who are comfortably alone.
- Summarise and gather similarly qualitative descriptions of the lived experience of painful loneliness from the numerous literature sources available on the topic.
- Discover the principal understandings and meanings that the comfortably alone attach to their aloneness so as to make their acceptable experience of it possible.
- Give recognition to the possibility that people can live alone and not be lonely.
- Allow the possibility that the comfortably alone can teach us ways of being and thinking around aloneness which can help those who suffer their alone times to change their experience of them.
- Gather practical methods and guidelines from the comfortably alone on how to manage time spent alone so that it does not turn into painful loneliness.

1.6 Necessity of this study

The author's first two clients at the UNISA psychotherapy training clinic, turned out to have dominant lived experiences of heightened aloneness and, along with a deficit of familial or social support, their realities often included experiences of painful loneliness. They described feelings of being completely alone even in big life decisions, of having no-one to turn to and of not truly belonging to any one place or person. This confirmed to the author the importance, and the urgency, of loneliness as a problem for some people and raised an interest in the nature of loneliness and the other emotive options to it.

Peplau and Perlman (1982) attest that loneliness is an important topic for study amongst human

scientists today. Beyond its being a very interesting research subject, they also go on to mention particular grounds for the relevance of investigating loneliness. Loneliness is a widespread psychological phenomenon that can decrease the quality of life experienced by persons across all age groups. It is also an intensely unpleasant experience that can even have life threatening consequences for some individuals when it leads to subsequent mental and physical illnesses and problems for them. The occurrence of loneliness also raises concern over the extent of social breakdown that it may reflect. These are surely important topics of study for psychologists and more knowledge of the existence, incidence, symptoms and development of loneliness, and comfortable aloneness, might help us to control and prevent the former.

The prevalence of loneliness as a problem for society is confirmed by Leveté (1993) who claims that it is causally linked to a number of social problems and illnesses. It is also proposed that, although loneliness might not always be the presenting problem, it regularly arises at some point in the course of psychotherapeutic treatment (McWhirter & Horan, 1996). The author believes that investigating options other than loneliness as a response to situational aloneness is important in that it may increase our knowledge about those who can be comfortably alone and make it known that people can have alternative experiences of their aloneness.

The author believes that the question of this study is a problem because no other research which specifically compared the two experiences from a descriptive and exploratory point of view could be found. By concentrating on the positive or neutral perceptions of those who are comfortable being alone new answers can be found, and new possibilities opened up, for others who find themselves living alone in the future. The psychology fraternity has long been seeking ways of helping people to prevent loneliness and/or cope with it and the accounts of those who do not feel lonely may provide new ideas and treatment options to mental health professionals as well.

2. THE PAINFUL EXPERIENCE OF LONELINESS

Just a castaway
An island lost at sea
Another lonely day
No-one here but me
More loneliness
Then any man could bear
Rescue me before I fall into despair

- The Police - *Message in a bottle*

2.1 Introduction

Wildman (1998) describes loneliness as a precious bane, and this phrase captures the ambivalence towards loneliness that is encountered in much of the literature on it. Human beings are social animals, born into groups and often living out their whole lives in one or more families, needing others for a sense of individual wholeness. At the same time, being alone, and sometimes lonely, is an inescapable part of the human condition and not purely an alien experience of the unfortunate. Wildman goes on to describe loneliness as a “necessary but undesirable concomitant of things needed and desired, accepted and overcome”(p. 2).

Loneliness seems to have earned itself a ‘bad reputation’ amongst the general public and professionals and we need to look at it more closely in order to broaden this picture. Wildman (1998) notes that, in the inevitable individuation of a developing person, he or she becomes aware of being different from others, a sense which can bring on feelings of confidence along with an experience of loneliness. He adds that, despite the emotional pain of loneliness, it might also be seen as a virtue if one can seek it out and befriend it. He furthermore links lonely times positively to creativity, a spiritual union with one’s god and the healing potential of solitude.

Loneliness appears to be a very subjective, personal and sensitive topic despite its being a very widespread state for human beings (Woodward, 1988). Almost all of us are left alone at some stage of our daily lives for varying periods of time; be it for parts of a day, a week, or even a year. Some are

even left relatively alone for unbroken months or years, and respond to this circumstance with varying degrees of either comfort or pain (Hritzuk, 1982). From the next chapter it will be seen, however, that the present author's understanding of loneliness goes beyond the mere time scales involved, although these very often enter into the likelihood of one feeling lonely, to a conception of this emotive state as one which is personally defined into being by each individual's punctuation of it.

In the very sense that human beings are individuals, regardless of the extent of their family or other group ties, they have the ability to be alone and lonely; to choose to be so or to find themselves in this state. The topic of this chapter then is, specifically, the subjective lived experience of loneliness. The whole research study will look at the manner in which some individuals honestly suffer their lonely times while others have positive or neutral stories to tell about being alone. It can even be expected that the same individual may experience either reaction, depending on the contexts and meanings that surround his or her circumstances. The existentialist thinkers stress the ultimate aloneness of the individual as a useful reminder for us to work out notions of choice, self-creation and identity (Maslow, 1960). It is interesting to note that they believe that all individuals are utterly and forever alone, but are not always aware of it (Natale, 1986).

2.2 Describing loneliness from the literature

The literature on loneliness is plentiful and varied and it will be used to depict the psychological aspects and the lived experience of painful loneliness. Literature on, or even references to, uncomplicated aloneness is, however, hard to find and often consists of no more than an allusion to the possibility of some people never feeling lonely. Buchholz and Catton (1999) concur that literature on aloneness is sparse. Various authors depict solitude, different from both loneliness and aloneness, as the positive and voluntary use of alone time for the consolidation of self and human growth, which can be a constructive way of dealing with being alone (Natale, 1986; Pothoff, 1976; Rubenstein & Shaver, 1974; Storr, 1988; Suedfeld, 1982; Woodward, 1988).

Solitude is, however, defined in the above sources as an elected state which is experienced as positive and as such it does not describe the experience that is under investigation. This study is, instead, concerned with those individuals who feel simply content and comfortable in their state of aloneness, while still acknowledging their relative isolation. The important difference between uncomplicated aloneness and either loneliness or solitude would appear to be that the former describes an aware state

in which individual feel neither troubled nor inspired, but more neutral about their circumstance.

The experience of loneliness is not so much a feeling or an emotion as it is, more abstractly, a state of being (Wildman, 1998). Loneliness is, rather, expressed **through** emotions which will not necessarily appear as the same for all people or even for one person at different times. The same author reminds us, as researchers, that questioning loneliness is an ontological task and that we must therefor do justice to the human experience of loneliness. He adds that one needs to use a kind of phenomenological analysis to detect the nature of loneliness, a “storytelling with commentary” (p. 21). To respect these concerns this chapter will concentrate on the lived personal experience of painful loneliness and will attempt to distill the essence of this state of being from the descriptions and accounts to be found in the research literature.

In answering the question posed, this dissertation will concentrate primarily on the typical qualitative goals, methods and products of psychological research. The bulk of the available literature on loneliness as a psychological phenomenon, however, is oriented from a quantitative research approach. As the author’s epistemology is ecosystemic this allows for the inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative data as valid sources of information, as long as they are identified as such. On this basis this chapter includes both the traditional ‘measured’ research data of quantitative studies on loneliness and the more ‘descriptive’ research data of qualitative studies on loneliness. Sections 2.3 (Loneliness in language), 2.4 (Loneliness as a psychological phenomenon), 2.12 (A need for loneliness?), 2.13 (The experience of loneliness) and 2.14 (The difference in aloneness) can be considered as the qualitative contributions to this chapter.

2.3 Loneliness in language

Much wisdom is gathered into language, as in proverbs and the origins of words, and investigating the inclusion of the **loneliness** in poetry and language can show up how much is lonely about the word itself (Ricks, 1998). **Lonely** has no true synonyms, only words such as solitude and aloneness, which this study has described as very different in meaning and affect. Even definitions of loneliness are inadequate and resort to the use of the above “synonyms” that have none of the emotional colouring and plea of the meaning behind being lonely. Ricks notes that there are no proverbs, catch-phrases, similes or metaphors which include the word and that the only rhyming word for lonely is **only**.

The above author goes on to contend that there is no verb of lonely; the idea that others can not do it to you heightens the sense of being alone in loneliness. No single word exists for the opposite of lonely and one needs a phrase to describe it. Language's attempts to make the words **lonely** and **loneliness** sound less alone or lonely have produced attempts which failed at being integrated into the English language. Ricks (1974) mentions a number of these as: lonedom (1612, nonce-word), loneful (1565, 1844, Scots), lonelihood (1830, Scott) and loneness (1591) (1998). Rubenstein and Shaver (1982) can add to this the meaning of the word **lonely**'s Middle English root, which is "all one" (or only one).

Language in loneliness also poses difficulties and Fromm-Reichmann (1959) noted that people who are in the grip of severe degrees of loneliness cannot talk about it and she used the term "real loneliness" to describe this state. She further makes a point of recording, in the abstract of the above publication, that she attempted to "break through the aloneness of thinking about loneliness" (p.1) by communicating what she had learnt in the writing up of her study. Loneliness is essentially a solitary thing, something that we can only do by ourselves, because the moment that we share it with another person it disappears for that time (Woodward, 1988).

2.4 Loneliness as a psychological phenomenon

It is claimed that loneliness is the number one national disease in the United States of America and that it is becoming a serious and perplexing problem for millions of people there, and possibly around the world (Hritzuk, 1982). The assumption that this 'chronic condition' is the natural offspring of twentieth century democratisation, fragmentation, private rituals, self-help and disillusionment further suggests that it may continue to be a problem, and more than likely still increase. Rubenstein and Shaver (1974), however, argue that loneliness is not an illness (although it may cause physical illness) but rather a normal and healthy warning sign that important psychological, intimacy and community needs are going unmet; not unlike hunger warning us of a need for nourishment.

In the same vein Leveté (1993) claims that loneliness is a particularly Western phenomenon which is causally linked to a number of social problems and illnesses, such as depression, anxiety, insomnia and heart disease. She adds that being lonely also seems to carry a socially created and maintained stigma, with people being ashamed of the isolation and demoralisation of finding themselves in this state. Leveté contends, however, that loneliness is not an " 'ism', an illness or an addiction" (p.3) and she puts forward many suggestions for getting out of the cycle of loneliness. Leveté is writing from a self-

help or popular psychology point of view and it appears that her intention is to define loneliness as a common but significant social problem which can be overcome.

For a condition as pervasive and important as loneliness would appear to be from the above literature, it is surprising to see that it received little professional attention until the 1960's and 70's. Weiss (1973), considered to be a respected authority on loneliness since his 1973 publication on the topic, claims that loneliness was a largely neglected topic in the psychology, psychiatry and sociology literature. He adds that the literature was lacking in studies that would describe what loneliness is, and that there were no papers which captured the phenomenon of loneliness, that understood its nature or illuminated descriptive or theoretical accounts of it. Despite his belief that professional clinicians would find value for their work in an increased understanding of loneliness it took until the closing decades of the last century before loneliness was seriously addressed as a topic in psychology.

Natale (1986) concurs that very little was written on loneliness until the middle of the last century, short of the seminal works of Frieda Fromm-Reichman and Harry Stack Sullivan. Their contributions amounted to little more than Sullivan's belief that loneliness was an exceedingly unpleasant driving force more terrible than anxiety, and Fromm-Reichman's expectation that people actively rejected memories of being lonely and consequently underestimated their experience of it, for instance giving an excuse that they were not themselves at the time, in order to be removed from it (Weiss, 1973).

Weiss (1973) proposes that loneliness was little studied in the past because there was no theory on it and it could therefore be neglected. Since the time of Weiss' 1973 book on loneliness there has been a significant increase in research on loneliness particularly in the number of scales and methods used in diagnosing and measuring loneliness (Rokach & Brock, 1997). From that decade onwards loneliness has been considered a topic of great importance for researchers and writers and there are publications on it across the academic fields, from psychology and psychiatry to religion, sociology, medicine and philosophy. Subsequently loneliness has been viewed as amongst the most common distresses and "as prevalent as colds during the winter" (Weiss, 1973, p. 2).

From the more recent literature on this topic, however, it appears that most writers, even social scientists producing academic works, approach loneliness from a point of view of offering advice on how to overcome or cope with it. It is difficult to find an unadorned description of it and this may be because most people feel the stigma and threat that it holds for their well-being, and they assume that

it must be changed. In this light it can be said that, in a sense, songwriters and poets have contributed more to a description of loneliness than have professionals. In respect of this the author has included the ideas of various popular songs around loneliness and aloneness in a verse or two at the beginning of each chapter.

2.5 Types of loneliness

Loneliness would appear to be an original experience for each person and theorists have formalised their thoughts around different possible types of loneliness, an idea which contributes to the uniqueness of this state. Weiss (1973) believed that loneliness was not caused merely by the condition of being alone but rather by being without some definite needed relationship or set of relationships. He was first to refer to the distinctions between social and emotional loneliness, states which are both uniformly distressing and accompanied by the same drive to rid the self of the associated distress. Various researchers have since chosen Weiss' concepts of social and emotional (or intimacy) loneliness as useful constructs in their work (DiTommaso & Spinner, 1997; Rotenberg & MacKie, 1999).

To Weiss (1973), **emotional loneliness** comes about when a person experiences a lack or loss of a truly intimate tie, usually with a spouse, lover, parent or child. He furthermore suggests that the wounds of emotional isolation heal very slowly because one must first find an involvement which is comparably as intense as the one lost. The lonely person then also has to overcome feelings of anger against the one who has "left". **Social loneliness** is different, according to Weiss, in that it can occur for someone who lacks a network of involvement with peers of some sort, usually friends, kinfolk, neighbours, fellow workers or hobbyists.

A more recent author, Hritzuk (1982), refers to two different types of loneliness, namely **loneliness I** and **loneliness II**, and he uses descriptions of how to overcome each type to differentiate between them. His claim is that **loneliness I** can be overcome by persons thinking well of themselves, truly liking themselves as unique human beings and seeing themselves as worthy individuals. **Loneliness II**, on the other hand, can be overcome by establishing quality relationships with meaningful people in one's life. This second type of loneliness is portrayed as occurring especially at times of great change or disruption in one's life, such as during adolescence, separation, divorce or old age, and as being most easily overcome by the lonely individual reaching out to another person to share feelings with depth and honesty.

In a similar vein we can look at the differences between Von Witzleben's (1968) primary and secondary loneliness. He defines **primary loneliness** as a state not dependent on the loss of an "object" but rather as something intrinsic in everyone. It is that inborn feeling of being alone and helpless in the world which people often try to ameliorate by means of their sense of progress in life through, amongst other things, their professional ambitions and achievements. **Secondary loneliness**, on the other hand, is caused by the loss of an "object" and expressed as grief and melancholia over this loss.

Gaev (1976) expands on the above definitions in that she views loneliness as a feeling experienced when our need for relatedness with **some aspect of our world** is frustrated. She identifies five main types of loneliness associated with a person's unsatisfied needs for relatedness to important aspects of the human experience. **Loneliness of the inner self** is a feeling of estrangement from one's own real personality. Gaev describes this as a feeling of being out of touch with one's own true feelings, not knowing who one really is or what one wants, being a phoney or inauthentic, and she relates this type of loneliness to the psychological term self-alienation.

Physical loneliness is the frustration, longing or need for physical closeness, contact or touch with significant others (Gaev, 1976). **Emotional loneliness** is different in that it describes a general feeling of sadness and longing when the need for genuine emotional closeness, affection or meaningful conversation with significant others is frustrated, even if in a relationship. Gaev uses the term **social loneliness** to present the feeling of sadness from the unsatisfied need to belong or have a place in the social world and she likens it to the sociological term of alienation. Lastly, **spiritual loneliness** describes the feelings of emptiness and isolation coming about from the unfulfilled need for direction, meaning or purpose in life.

In identifying types of loneliness Gaev (1976) is also specific about the form in which loneliness affects our lives. She talks of existential and pathological forms of loneliness where the former is caused by experiences that are a normal part of life. An example here would be the intense loneliness that is experienced after a separation from a loved one or after an emotional loss. The latter form she indicates as occurring when feelings of sadness and longing become chronic such that the person is unable to form any close relationships with others, the self, society or life as a whole. The pathologically lonely are almost always lonely because they are not able to satisfy their relatedness needs.

Ferns (1988) refers to Sadler's five dimensions of loneliness which contribute another complex

approach to the lived experience of this phenomenon. The **psychological dimension** of loneliness depicts that which comes about from the individual feeling separated from the self or a part of the self. **Interpersonal loneliness** relates to the experience of longing for a specific person or a more general yearning for love and friendship. The **social dimension of loneliness** differs in that it represents a person's exclusion from an important social group. Sadler's **cultural loneliness** describes a sense of being removed from a traditional lifestyle or system of meanings. And, lastly, the **cosmic dimension** refers to loneliness experienced as a result of being out of touch with a universal sense of order or source of life and meaning, be it from one's religion, philosophy or sense of destiny.

From the above descriptions of different types of loneliness it can be assumed that loneliness is viewed in either one of two ways. The first authors (i.e. Weiss, Hritzuk and Von Witzleben) emphasise loneliness as being caused by one's unsatisfied relatedness with either the self, intimates or groups, but people predominate in these models. The last two writers (i.e. Gaev and Sadler) approach loneliness from a broader base of life needs, each identifying five areas of possible lack or loss in the human relatedness experience which can lead to loneliness. It is easier to use these latter models to explain how it might be that people who live relatively isolated from intimates or others might not feel lonely as long as their needs for, say, relatedness to the self, or to a deity, are satisfied.

2.6 The structure of loneliness

Rokach and Brock (1997) differ with most of the previous research that viewed loneliness as a largely unidimensional experience, and they undertook to examine and define the salient emotions, thoughts and behaviours which comprise a more comprehensive view of it. These authors suggest that loneliness is in fact a multidimensional experience which encompasses certain cognitive, emotional and behavioural manifestations. They propose that it is comprised of five clearly distinguished factors, namely, emotional distress, social inadequacy and alienation, interpersonal alienation, self-alienation and lastly, growth and discovery.

Along with the five primary factors as identified above, Rokach and Brock (1997) have put forward several secondary factors that constitute the experience and manifestations of loneliness and these make it easier to recognise the painful symptoms of lonely people. **Emotional distress** can be broken down into the feelings of agony and turmoil and/or emptiness and hopelessness often described by the lonely. **Social inadequacy and alienation** can be expanded into factors described as perceived social

alienation, self-generated social detachment and self-deprecation, while **interpersonal alienation** can be related to an absence of intimacy and feelings of abandonment. These last two primary factors would very likely be linked to Weiss' (1973) concepts of social loneliness and emotional loneliness respectively. The **self-alienation** factor is associated with secondary factors of self-detachment and denial, symptoms which could be used to identify Gaev's (1976) concept of loneliness of the inner self. Lastly, **growth and discovery** are expanded into personal and interpersonal factors which describe improved appreciation of, and relationships with, the self and others. This theme, if not for the accompanying pain and longing of loneliness, would be called solitude because of its emphasis on "time out" in which to reflect, create and enjoy one's own company (Rokach and Brock, 1997).

Other theorists have proposed that loneliness possesses a hierarchical, bi-dimensional and oblique structure (Joiner, Catanzaro, Rudd & Rajab, 1999). They argue that, at the highest level of abstraction, loneliness is largely a unidimensional construct but that at the next level two distinct but related facets of loneliness can be discriminated. Their proposed higher order factor of **General Loneliness** includes the first facet **Lack of Pleasurable Engagement** which they conceptualise as a necessary and sufficient condition for a person to feel lonely. The second facet, **Painful Disconnection**, is neither necessary nor sufficient for the development of general loneliness, but rather is a common emotional reaction to loneliness-related events.

The above authors go on to explain their assumption that all lonely people will experience a lack of pleasurable contact with others but not necessarily the sense of painful disconnection (Joiner et al., 1999). Joiner et al. compare their view to Weiss' (1973) claim that social loneliness is, similarly, a necessary and sufficient condition of feeling lonely, whereas emotional loneliness is not. These facets of loneliness will, furthermore, be related to each other in terms of the personality, mood and life events of the individual in question.

A different take on the structure of loneliness can be found in the phenomenological approach towards it. This approach looked for the major and exhaustive "components", or "essences", involved in the experience of loneliness and indicates them as being hostility, narcissism, entitlement, depression, anxiety and the inability to communicate (Mijuskovic, 1996). These "elements" are necessarily and universally connected, while they are not identical and can still be conceptually distinguished. Mijuskovic believes that these structures are somehow dynamically interrelated or intrapsychically fused in the loneliness experience such that loneliness will not occur without them.

Certainly the inability to communicate, the anxiety and the depression of many lonely people has been well documented (Natale, 1986; Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Rubenstein & Shaver, 1974). As can be seen the structure of loneliness is closely related to the different types of loneliness, as proposed in the previous section, and it would seem that some of these studies support each other while others contradict each other. The number and variety of publications on the structure and types of loneliness supports, if nothing else, the argument that this phenomenon is an entirely personal and unique experience for each individual.

2.7 The causes of loneliness

The researchers cited in this section have paid much attention to the factors that cause loneliness in their attempts to prevent it, or describe how to better deal with it once it has started. For the purposes of intervening in the experience of painful loneliness we can separate its causes into those which are precipitating and those which are maintaining (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1974). Precipitating factors are those which can start off, or originally 'cause', loneliness and they can be one or more of the following: the death of someone close, divorce or separation, breaking up with a lover or friend, relocation of a friend or self, a job change, retirement, promotion or firing, graduation, a debilitating accident, the onset of a serious illness, a sudden drop in income, a change in physical self or even the start of a season such as the holidays.

Maintaining factors would be those elements which can prolong loneliness and even ensure that it continues. Factors such as a low self-esteem, an inability to trust, unfortunate behavioural or personal style, clinging or evading, being self-conscious, fearing rejection, solitude or intimacy, being unwilling to risk, self-blaming, perfectionistic, having no sense of self, being easily bored, feeling unattractive, being poor, bedridden, handicapped or having no transport could all maintain loneliness in an individual (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1974).

The above authors go on to add that individuals' perception of the causes of their loneliness (as either "In me" or "In the situation", and as either permanent or temporary) will make it respectively more difficult or more easy to change (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1974). Pothoff (1976) provides support for the importance of this distinction in his understanding of the differences between the types of loneliness as determined by either external conditions, factors inside ourselves or both. It would seem conceivably easier to weather loneliness brought on by a temporary condition of living instead of that maintained

by personal difficulties with reaching out to others, for example.

Peplau and Perlman's (1982) understanding of the antecedents of loneliness also draws a distinction between precipitating events, such as changes in relationships or changes in needs and desires, and predisposing and/or maintaining factors, such as personal and situational vulnerabilities. The state versus trait argument of Hector-Taylor and Adams (1996) is likewise relevant here. These authors depict **state loneliness** as that which is transiently or situationally induced, whereas **trait loneliness** could be a chronic or dispositional condition. To distinguish between the two in a study with elderly New Zealanders they instructed their subjects to respond to the UCLA Loneliness Scale, Version 3, for the time frames "over the last two weeks" for state loneliness, and "looking back over your life" for trait loneliness.

In an attempt to better understand loneliness by exploring its antecedents researchers identified five factors which describe the various causes of loneliness (Rokach & Brock, 1996; Rokach, 1997). They are: **unfulfilling intimate relationships, relocation/significant separations and social marginality** (grouped together as experiential and situational in nature) and then **personal inadequacies and developmental deficits** (grouped together as characterological and historical in nature). These authors refer to a previous study of Rokach (1996) in which she also identified causal factors of loneliness which grouped into three conceptual clusters of relational deficits, traumatic events and characterological and developmental variables. These conceptual clusters can be seen to agree strongly with the above factor analysis of the antecedents of loneliness into groups.

The cognitive and attributional strategies that people apply in social situations have been identified as possible causative or maintaining factors for loneliness (Nurmi, Toivonen, Salmela-Aro & Eronen, 1996; Nurmi, Toivonen, Salmela-Aro & Eronen, 1997). Their studies found that a pessimistic avoidance strategy was associated with subsequent feelings of loneliness even after controlling for levels of self-esteem. Pessimism, in terms of overall negative attitudes toward social realities and a view of the self, could lead to the vicious circle of expected failures in social situations, and then resorting to the dysfunctional strategic patterns of social withdrawal and behavioural self-handicapping (Nurmi et al., 1997). Low self-esteem could precipitate and maintain loneliness in that it is associated with unpopularity and less success in initiating meaningful relationships.

McWhirter's (1997) study on loneliness turned up significant inverse relationships between both self-

esteem and loneliness, and learned resourcefulness and loneliness. Ferns (1988) confirms that various aspects of personality, such as a low self-concept, and an internal as opposed to an external locus of control, are also related to the experience of loneliness. Lastly, Berblinger (1968) gives us a psychiatrist's view of the personal predispositions for loneliness which he understands to be dependency, identity crisis, and a shifting self-image, along with the contributing socio-cultural factors such as group disintegration, poor communication abilities, the person versus system orientation, social mobility, technology and modern-day specialisation.

2.8 Populations of lonely people

Having looked at various determining factors of loneliness, it appears that most of the above researchers have identified either situational or life events, and then also personality types or dispositions, which could work alone or together to predispose a person to, or maintain existing, loneliness. It can be expected then that certain populations that are high on any or all of these characteristics should also be often present in the numbers of lonely people at any given time.

Specific developmental or life stages can challenge individuals' original view of themselves and their world so as to be estranging. Childhood (Asher & Gazelle, 1999) and adolescence (Buccholz & Catton, 1999; Mahon, Yarcheski & Yarcheski, 1996) are particularly change-based times in this regard. Potthoff (1976) would add that there are particular periods of crisis or change during infancy, childhood, adolescence, young, middle and late adulthood when potential prejudice, discrimination and/or the lack of communication with an understanding person can lead to loneliness. In a sense, various conditions can combine to add up to loneliness throughout the human life span. Various authors have also indicated that the aged, especially those who are men or who are more disabled or who feel that their health and economic condition is poor or who have no friends or children, are likely candidates for loneliness (Hector-Taylor & Adams, 1996; Mullins, Elston & Gutkowski, 1996).

Koropecykj-Cox (1998) counters this last point with her findings that the childless and never-married elderly are not necessarily lonely as they have often established personal and social resources in anticipation of the future. On the other hand, Stack (1998) found that marriage is associated with substantially less loneliness while parenthood was not, but that men who were married and fathers experienced low levels of loneliness. Within families, Ponzetti and James (1997) found that adolescent sibling bonds of rivalry and closeness were negatively related to loneliness whereas conflict was

positively related to loneliness. Altogether it appears that marriage and family life, for both parents and children, do not ensure a non-lonely existence.

Those who have been recently bereaved are often lonely for varying periods of time due to their loss of a significant relationship (Stroebe, Stroebe, Abakoumkin & Schut, 1996; Wagnild & Young, 1990). In a similar way individuals from divorced, separated or broken-up couples can run the risk of loneliness from the loss of an intimate relationship (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1974). In other circumstances where individuals are removed from their families or meaningful social circles they can experience loneliness, as is clear in the case of college students (MacWhirter, 1997). Le Roux (1998), however, notes her study at a specific university which found that students with a stronger Christian faith experienced less loneliness, suggesting that a spiritual relationship may help some prevent or overcome potential loneliness. Prison inmates (Phelps, Waite & Hillbrand, 1998) and incarcerated men (Rokach & Cripps, 1998; Rokach & Cripps, 1999) also fit the bill for those removed from social support and they can also often be lonely.

People in other circumstances, such as being deaf (Silver, 1996; Steinberg, Sullivan & Montoya, 1999), or having childhood language disorders (Asher & Gazelle, 1999), may experience difficulties integrating socially and encounter resultant loneliness. Even members of royalty and those in positions of power or public life might experience times when the support of others is unavailable. Moustakas (1961, p. 77) quotes Truman on this point, that "To be president of the United States is to be lonely, very lonely at times of great decisions". Another population making huge decisions with regards to their own futures are those contemplating suicide. Joiner and Rudd (1996) report that, whereas the suicidal are often lonely, they usually only act on their ideas when their loneliness is accompanied by a sense of hopelessness.

2.9 Culture and gender differences in loneliness

Whereas it is helpful to identify populations of individuals more likely to experience loneliness, we also need to look at the culture and gender differences which show up in the incidence of loneliness. Researchers have found significant differences in the experience of loneliness, the perception of the antecedents of loneliness and the coping strategies used against loneliness between different cultural groups (Rokach & Sharma, 1996; Rokach, 1998; Rokach, 1999). Anderson (1999) concurs that the different, and sometimes maladaptive, attributional styles used by cultures other than the American

culture (specifically Chinese students) account for their higher loneliness scores. The 'rules' of loneliness are often bent and McWhirter (1997) found that, while minority students showed the same inverse relationship between self-esteem and loneliness as the majority, intimate loneliness was raised by learned resourcefulness - a construct possibly less valued by group oriented cultures.

In terms of sex differences in loneliness Mullins et al. (1996) found that elderly men in their study were most notably prone to being lonely. This corresponds with Cramer and Neyedley's (1998) findings that males tend to be lonelier than females and also appear to be reluctant to admit to their feelings of loneliness. We must consider the implications that these conclusions may hold for this study. Of the participants in this study, all of whom define themselves as alone but not lonely, roughly half are men and the above cautions will have to be kept in mind during interpretation of their performances. Clinton and Anderson (1999) found, however, that in their African American sample, the gender differences were relatively small in magnitude and they caution that the typical differences in the popular press between men and women should be questioned when it comes to the phenomenon of loneliness.

2.10 The effects of loneliness

On the negative side, the effects of long-term loneliness are connected with stress and poor health and often contribute to premature death (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1974). The same authors associate psychosomatic problems and symptoms such as insomnia, heart pains and disease, breathing trouble, poor appetite, digestive problems, losing interest in sex, being overweight or just feeling fat, serious disease and having a disabling accident with loneliness. They also report the negative effects of loneliness on one's mental state as feelings of worthlessness, constant worry, anxiety, irrational fears, trouble concentrating, feeling irritably, guilty and angry, having crying spells, feeling tired and that one just can not go on. Murphy and Kupshik (1992) concur that loneliness is positively correlated with depression and anxiety. Researchers found that certain dieters in a loneliness mood condition consumed more food than others who felt neutral, supporting the popular belief that lonely people eat to feel better (Rotenberg & Flood, 1999).

The lonely are often stigmatised, with college students ascribing lower psychosocial functioning to, and reporting less acceptance of, their lonely peers (Rotenberg, 1998). Lau and Kong (1999) concur that non-lonely perceivers reacted more negatively toward lonely target persons, and that lonely people also had lower or more negative self-perceptions than the non-lonely. Christensen and Kashy (1998) expand

on this with their findings of the perceptions of, and by, lonely people, who viewed others somewhat more positively, themselves more negatively, and thought that others viewed them more negatively. It is difficult to imagine change in these behaviours amongst the high lonely groups and Laine (1998) demonstrated that such students use internal-stable attributional styles which result in their being unable to see any chances of controlling their loneliness, and therefore probably unlikely to even try.

Hritzuk (1982) maintains that people usually cope with loneliness by denying that it exists, daydreaming up alternatives, compensating with other things, or developing defence mechanisms such as escapism, masking, displacement, blaming, withdrawing or avoidance around it. He also mentions that some will seek out marriage in an attempt to solve the fear of loneliness but Weiss (1973) warns that this could turn out to be an “empty shell” marriage which furthermore prevents the lonely person from finding anyone else. The above point concerning the denial of loneliness will be kept in mind when this study selects subjects who claim that they are not lonely but rather comfortable in their aloneness, and their self reports will be compared with their performance of the UCLA Loneliness Scale Version 3 (Revised).

Other responses to loneliness are more positive, with people finding successful ways of coping with it or seeking out therapy for themselves. Coping strategies best suited to manage, and reduce, the pain of loneliness were found to be acceptance and reflection, social integration and increased activity (Rokach, 1996; Rokach & Brock, 1998). Rokach and Brock (1998) add that self-development and understanding, as a strategy, resembles the welcomed aloneness of solitude and can result in positive growth. On the other hand, some people are unwilling to recognise or admit that they are lonely and this may show up in their strategies of distancing and denial, which would not suffice to deal with loneliness on an ongoing basis.

2.11 Coping with loneliness

McWhirter and Horan (1996) propose that, although a client’s loneliness is often not the presenting problem in therapy, psychologists regularly get to address this difficulty in the course of treatment. They worked on two cognitive-behavioural interventions for the intimate and social types of loneliness and found that their ‘social loneliness treatment’ significantly decreased both intimate and social loneliness in their sample. It could be argued that, in finding a therapist, the lonely person has already manipulated his or her world so as to create a confidant, or someone to listen, and that this might

alleviate loneliness in itself.

Levete (1993) also suggests therapeutic support for those experiencing loneliness, but adds a number of practical suggestions that lonely individuals can try out themselves. She lists joining introduction agencies and singles clubs, or setting up a group oneself, doing volunteer work, taking up artistic activities or sports and even simply going on holidays. Loneliness can also be dealt with through changes that the person brings about in him- or herself, such as learning to appreciate solitude, making him- or herself more attractive, or occupying his or her time with many activities (Levete, 1993). Murphy and Kupshik (1992) add that learning new social rules, maintaining and deepening existing relationships and managing thoughts that promote loneliness can also help to overcome it.

In order to cope with loneliness it can be expected that individuals will have to change either their actual social relations, their social needs or desires, or their perceived importance of any relational deficit in their lives (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). The same authors allow that people can, and do, create "surrogate" relationships with pets, television personalities or radio talk show hosts in an attempt to find company. Others might select tasks and activities that are usually done alone, deny their lonely feelings, devalue the idea of having a relationship or find distractions such as work or drinking to escape their loneliness. The number of self-help and popular psychology books on the topic of coping with loneliness attest to the number of people who are lonely, who might attempt to deal with it, and possibly succeed in doing so.

Gaev (1976) believes that self healing can work and that relatively healthy people can take steps to overcome their feelings of loneliness by themselves. It is suggested that individuals first need to understand loneliness before they can deal with it (Pothoff, 1976). If they can then see how their loneliness originated, through external conditions and/or factors within the self, then they are in a position to change their experience of loneliness by developing a more positive inner life or interactive life-style, for instance. Pothoff allows that practicing a religion can also alleviate the pain of loneliness by introducing meaning into people's lives and assuring them of ultimate and continued relatedness through the message of "You are not alone" (p. 24).

2.12 A need for loneliness

Moustakas (cited in Hoff & Buchholz, 1996) is a strong proponent of the need for loneliness as a

potentially positive aspect of human life, and he notes that, in the spiritual and creative experience, there is often no other way but the lonely way. The spiritual relationships that individuals have with their God can further be created or enhanced by the use of loneliness in the form of solitude (Davies, 1996; Storr, 1988). Wildman (1998) writes of the benefits of living and coping with loneliness, of allowing it to have its season of dynamic restlessness in our lives. If we can allow this, then “loneliness slowly transforms us into compassionate rulers, humble listeners, great adventurers, truer companions, freer wanderers and deeper grievers” (Wildman, 1998, p. 37).

Storr (1988) outlines the need that creative people have for lonely times during which they can be preoccupied with internal processes of integration. Other writers also name loneliness as a prerequisite of creativity (Hoff & Buccholz, 1996; Rouner, 1998). Highly introspective adolescents were found to be more likely to participate in artistic and cultural activities while gifted teenagers and other talented students were found to spend more time alone and to use solitude effectively (Buchholz & Catton, 1999). Mahon et al. (1996) cite Fromm-Reichmann and other writers’ propositions that constructive loneliness is positively related to creativity, but report their own contradictory findings that measures of loneliness and creativity are inversely related.

It is suggested that, through the experience of loneliness, individuals can learn important things about themselves, become more aware of the needs of others, discover deep resources of spirit previously unknown to them and grow in awareness and sensitivity (Pothoff, 1976). It is furthermore often true that many philosophers, artists, authors and poets have either suffered from loneliness or chosen solitude as a way of enhancing their mastery. Loneliness may even be required in rites of passage that include periods of solitude in which people achieve a closeness with the self, have time to reflect and reassess and strengthen themselves (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1974).

There are populations of people who are unusual, such as adventurers, sages, saints, sailors and seekers, or in unusual activities, such as religious or spiritual quests, who can use isolation as a therapeutic technique (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). These authors quote Byrd, who spent five months alone in one place in the Antarctic during the winter of 1934, as having said of this experience that “The ones who survive with a measure of happiness are those who can live profoundly off their intellectual resources” (p. 57). In a similar manner Buechler (1998) maintains that these habits of mind are also required to bear the loneliness of psychoanalytic exploration. She adds that “It is in the realm of the imagination, relatively protected from brooding and anxiety, nurtured and stimulated by selected reading, that the

context for withstanding the loneliness of analytic inquiry can be created" (p. 91).

Peres (1988) discusses loneliness as something that is frequently encountered in therapy, experienced by patients and even evoked by the therapeutic process, as well as the potential loneliness of therapists themselves. The psychiatrist with specific personal problems, while treating lonely people, has to be alert for, and recognize, traces of his or her own loneliness, or fear of loneliness, that could result in work-related stress or treatment impasses (Fromm-Reichmann, 1959). Buechler (1998) suggests that analysts experience loneliness in part because during emotion and pain-inducing moments, they can not always have enough of themselves with themselves to be of comfort and that they need to learn a capacity to be alone.

Hoff and Buccholz (1996) take a different tack and look at the school psychologist's risk of occupational hazards, such as job stress and burnout, which they suggest could be alleviated by the use of creativity and what they call "alonetime", as potential resources to draw upon. They go on to support the idea that "alonetime", used for experiences of solitude, reflection and meditation, could spur creative development, a potentially critical factor that can positively influence a practitioner's mental state and on-the-job experience (Hoff & Buccholz; 1996). Finally, Schwartz and Olds (1997) advise that health professionals move from their usual emphasis on clients' relationships as a measure of mental health towards recognising loneliness as a normal emotion, and solitude as a valid choice. It should be added that this proviso also applies to the mental health professionals themselves as well.

2.13 The experience of loneliness

Having dealt with many aspects of loneliness it is now necessary to describe the lived experience of loneliness as a basis against which to compare the lived experience of aloneness. Rouner (1998) portrays the feeling vividly as the agony of the lonely soul, and describes the primary characteristic of loneliness as a dynamic driving restlessness. Loneliness can include an experience of anxiety, which is vague and pervasive, in which one feels panicked and helpless; one does not know how to cope with it and fears that it may overwhelm one (Gaev, 1976). She adds that most people consciously fear loneliness because it makes them feel emotionally uncomfortable.

Pothoff (1976) reminds us that loneliness is a feeling which is unique and different for each individual, and adds that the awareness of our inability to fully share it with another person deepens the feeling

of isolation that the lonely experience brings. He calls this feeling of isolation the deepest pain of all in loneliness. Rubenstein and Shaver (1974) maintain that, until recently, people have felt embarrassed about their loneliness, preferring to keep quiet about it, and either blaming themselves or admitting to it very uncomfortably. A more modern source also contends that most people are a little lonely but that relatively few will actually say so (Murphy & Kupshik, 1992).

Weiss (1973) described the feelings associated with both emotional and social loneliness. He depicts emotional isolation as a state in which one experiences a sense of utter aloneness and a pervasive apprehension; where one's outer world feels barren and desolate and one's inner world feels empty, dead and hollow. Social isolation would be experienced as aimlessness, feelings of marginality, boredom, restlessness and a drive to find a group or activities. Other people have described a sense of emptiness which recurs with successive failed attempts to fill the hole in their lives, and this may develop into feelings akin to fear, anxiety or desperation when it appears that this pain may never end (Natale, 1986; Rubenstein & Shaver, 1974).

Rubenstein and Shaver (1974) talk of a 'loneliness continuum' which starts off at the least disturbing sense of impatience, boredom, uneasiness and an inability to concentrate (for example, while waiting for someone to come home) to the most disturbing sense of desperation, helplessness, panic, abandonment, hopelessness, vulnerability and fear. In distinguishing the differences between loneliness, aloneness and solitude Suedfeld (1982) notes that loneliness can hurt, aloneness can heal and solitude can be a springboard for health and growth. He observes, however, that even social scientists, parents, teachers and social critics unfortunately still often view alone individuals as aberrant, maladjusted and pathological.

2.14 The difference in aloneness

Being alone is neither necessary nor sufficient for one to feel the negative emotional state of loneliness, as described above (Suedfeld, 1982). The same author observes that people are differentially susceptible to feeling lonely, somewhat independently of the actual social environment, and he suggests that there are probably some people who never feel lonely. Whereas loneliness is described as a negative state which is coupled with sadness and hopelessness, aloneness is most often described as feeling simply neutral (Buchholz & Catton, 1999).

In their study with adolescents Buchholz and Catton (1999) found that subjects were indeed able to distinguish between loneliness and aloneness. Subjects described aloneness as a temporary state, not coupled with unpleasant feelings, and they gave examples of being alone that were not painful or negative, such as simply not being with anyone else or being by oneself for a brief time. They did not, however, report any positive experiences of being alone, despite its recognised benefits, and Buchholz and Catton suggest that this is because of cultural messages that discourage people from seeking time alone, and ultimately limit our ability to be alone. The researchers add that humans are born with the need to be alone at times, and that aloneness is a developmental necessity for human growth and learning the ability to self-regulate needs and emotions.

Buchholz and Helbraun (1999) add that even infants have a biologically based, and psychologically warranted, need for aloneness which supports their development of self and inner coping strategies. We can expect, however, that the meaning and context around time spent alone will direct people's feelings about their aloneness. In this regard notable differences were found between the lived experiences of aloneness for older women with depression and those already recovering from depression (Wilkinson & Pierce, 1997). Compared to the negative thoughts and feelings of the depressed sample the recovering sample perceived their aloneness as a healthy experience which gave them the opportunity to make decisions, regain a sense of hope, be resourceful, come and go and do as they wanted, explore a sense of self and find a balance between involvement with society and with self.

Aloneness is described by some authors, especially Moustakas (1961, 1972, 1975), in terms that strongly resemble solitude. As such it is described as a creative space in which one has time for self-reflection. Wagnild and Young (1990) paint a similar picture in their descriptions of older women's existential aloneness which is described as the realization that everyone's life path is unique and that some experiences must be faced alone. This type of aloneness was experienced as a wellspring for creativity, comfort and self-acceptance and was accompanied by the realisation that existential aloneness bestows both a sense of uniqueness and a feeling of freedom. We all have a need to be alone, as well as a need to connect to others, with loneliness being the negative, and solitude the positive, extremes of the former (Buchholz & Catton 1999). Hritzuk (1982, p. 117-118) aptly cites Tillich's conjecture that "solitude is glory in being alone, while loneliness is pain in being alone".

Natale (1986) reminds us that, while many are alone and many are lonely, only some of those who are alone feel lonely. It would appear that personality differences account for why some people feel that

their very small networks are adequate (Fischer & Phillips, 1982) and why some can live alone without experiencing a sense of detachment from others (Hritzuk, 1982). To be alone demonstrates a degree of self-sufficiency and sometimes even a preference for this state (Levete, 1993). Peplau and Perlman (1982) report on their research on the subjective experience of being alone, stating that there can be both positive changes in cognitive states as well as the depression of some moods. They add that the aftereffects of being alone are marked by a return to normal mood levels with certain dimensions, such as alertness, cheerfulness and strength, even increasing. For some, it appears, aloneness is not merely tolerated but experienced as relatively good and accompanied by substantial improvements in cognitive state.

The ability to be alone can enrich our relationships and even prepare us for relatedness with others. Buchholz and Helbraun (1999, p. 144) cite Winnicott's assumption that "the 'capacity to be alone' (is) an essential element in the development of the 'true self'". Gaev (1976) furthermore proposes that only those persons who can stand alone, when necessary, can commit themselves to a long term love relationship. At the other extreme, Gunderson (1996) describes borderline patients whose intolerance of aloneness is associated with their typical clinging and attention-seeking forms of attachment that can actually handicap their relations with others. The present study is, however, concerned with people who feel ambivalent or neutral about their aloneness, even seeing it as a symbol of independence and autonomy (Peplau & Perlman, 1982).

2.15 Conclusion

Loneliness has been a part of the human experience for at least as long as our recorded history and the chances are good that it will remain with us for our future. Especially with our modern, high pressured, individualistic lifestyles loneliness would seem to be an inevitable part of our experience at one, or many, times in our lives. The common social discourses around loneliness would suggest that it is a terrible state, filled with pain and hopelessness, and viewed by those around the lonely individual with pity and apprehension. From other outlooks, especially the religious and philosophical fields, loneliness is understood as having additional potential benefits for those in need of healing, or finding themselves and/or their god. It is clear, then, that there is no final verdict as to the good or the bad of this state and that much ambivalence remains around loneliness.

From the now extensive literature on the topic of loneliness it is possible to distill the experience of

painful loneliness as it has been suffered by many people. The lived experience of loneliness is described variously as including a driving restlessness, pervasive anxiety, sense of helplessness, apprehension or aimlessness in which the extremes of isolation and desolation are such as to cause the individual psychic pain. Painful loneliness is depicted as a state which people fear and attempt to avoid because of how it can create emotional discomfort for them. Besides the negative impact that loneliness can have on affective states it is also reported to contribute to poor physical and mental health, and strong stigmatisation. Lonely people can respond with anything from outright denial to seeking therapeutic support, but it appears that change in some way is necessary for loneliness to subside. The last section of this chapter dealt with the differences that can be found in uncomplicated aloneness and this assumption forms the basis for this study's research question.

3. AN ECOSYSTEMIC EPISTEMOLOGY

Truth is not what we discover,
But what we create.

- Saint Exupéry -

3.1 Introduction

Keeney (1983) writes that what one perceives and knows is largely due to the distinctions that one draws. Such distinctions are drawn one way and not another because of the specific assumptions inherent in the knower's basic epistemology. Such an epistemology is a lens (Hoffman, 1990) through which one views the world, and through which one will then again report on it. This lens will 'colour' our received view of all things and inform us as to that which we can come to know and how we can come to know it. Having named this paper's epistemology as ecosystemic, the understandings that have been used in defining the problem, planning the research, gathering the data and finally making sense of them to write this paper, must be illustrated and illuminated.

The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology defines an epistemology as the "branch of philosophy that is concerned with the origins, nature, methods and limits of human knowledge" (Reber, 1985, p.256). Hoffman (1985), an ecosystemic thinker, defines epistemology as the study of how we know our knowing.

An epistemology will, therefore, be recognisable from the patterns of orientation towards research, and the particular focus on a problem, that one has. An ecosystemic psychologist, for instance, will have an ecosystemic epistemology (or perspective) which will colour all of his or her ideas about what types of research can be done, and the methods by which to do them, with an ecosystemic hue.

The same dictionary defines a paradigm as a "collective set of attitudes, values, procedures, techniques, etcetera that form the generally accepted perspective of a particular discipline at a point in time" (Reber, 1985, p.535). A paradigm, then, is very similar to an epistemology in that it also informs us as to what knowledge we can acquire and how we can get to know it. Both terms refer to the governing outlook of a practitioner, or a researcher writing up findings, and should be clearly described and

regularly used by him or her so as to make the communication of their work meaningful to the reader.

Both Bateson (1972) and Keeney (1983) emphasise the importance of one's epistemology and Keeney defines it as those basic premises that underlie all action and cognition. He claims that it is impossible for one not to have an epistemology because there are always presuppositions inherent in the way that one thinks and understands. Keeney writes that a person's habitual patterns of punctuation, as well as his or her premises for drawing distinctions, can be identified from his or her epistemology. It is the goal of this chapter, then, to illustrate the development of the ecosystemic epistemology and to demonstrate how its assumptions have shaped the author's manner of punctuating and distinguishing reality.

3.2 From individual to systemic psychology

This section will provide a broad overview of the shift from traditional linear thinking in psychology to the first order of systemic thinking. The picture created will by no means be complete, but it serves to place the developments within systemic theory in context for the reader. Terms and concepts relevant to this development towards a 'new epistemology' will be used to demonstrate how they are linked to other ideas and how they influence the author's assumptions. They will not, however, be fully defined and operationalised in this section but rather in the more comprehensive later sections which deal with the application of various systemic and ecosystemic concepts to the study of loneliness and aloneness.

My training has been as a psychologist and a therapist and I will describe the origins of the ecosystemic view towards therapy, and its influence on research, so as to put my epistemology into a meaningful context. The dominant schools of thought in psychotherapy can be divided into two primary outlooks with regards to their understanding of human nature and to conceptualising of how a therapist or researcher can intervene in, or know about, people's lives. Keeney (1979) describes these two points of view as the traditional linear epistemology and the ecological epistemology. Well known schools of thought in psychology which fit the linear, individual model are psychoanalysis and behaviourism, whereas ecosystemic family therapy is a good example of an ecological model.

The traditional linear individual psychologies came about within the context of a modern world which was caught up in the predominately Western tradition of positivistic science and Newtonian thinking (Auerswald, 1985). The individual psychology outlooks naturally absorbed the philosophical

assumptions of this tradition and were thus influenced to think of human nature, and of how to work with people in therapy, in a likewise manner. True to the ideals of the hard sciences, these branches of psychology constrained their focus to the level of observable and quantifiable sequences of behaviour (Keeney & Sprenkle, 1982). A huge influence from late nineteenth century physics was the idea that experimental evidence (experience) was the only reliable way of knowing (Auerswald, 1985).

Traditional psychologists pursued the question of “Why?” problems existed, from an underlying assumption that an individual is the receptor of linear causal effects and, hence, the ‘site’ of pathology (Keeney, 1979). Various understandings common to Newtonian thinking were originally borrowed by the discipline of psychology. For instance, the assumptions that one event is always linearly causative in relation to another, that ours is a dualistic universe which has either/or realities, and that truth can be seen as an absolute that we can accept with certainty (Auerswald, 1985).

Practitioners of the individual psychologies worked in a predominately reductionistic, or atomistic (Auerswald, 1985), manner in that they concerned themselves with reducing or simplifying phenomena for practical purposes. A traditional linear therapist would usually consult with only the individual within whom the problem was believed to exist (Keeney & Sprenkle, 1982). This individual was viewed as a reactive being whose future had been largely determined by powerful events that he or she had either missed out on or had to endure. Traditional therapists’, and researchers’, hunt for clues in understanding an individual’s behaviour also focused essentially on historical, as opposed to current, information. Their search was backed by a firm belief that a law-like external reality did exist, could be found and then manipulated. The principal assumption behind therapy was that a cause-and-effect chain existed and, when found, could be broken.

Despite the level of involvement with clients that these practitioners achieved, especially in intensive long-term therapies such as psychoanalysis, they still primarily thought of their work as a value-free endeavour. Based on the assumption that it was possible to achieve an objective position, they believed that therapists could work with clients without imposing their own values or beliefs on these clients’ meaning worlds. The behaviourists, especially, were convinced that they could objectively view an individual and observe measurable aspects of that person’s behaviour without influencing their presented behaviour. They did not share the ecosystemic awareness of the influence that thinking and operating with certain values and meanings could have on what they did and what they saw (Walters, 1990).

The conceptually different family systems therapy is a much younger domain, and it has taken its underlying assumptions from the basic tenets of Bateson's alternative epistemology, namely general systems theory, and cybernetic and ecological principles (Keeney, 1983). These, it believes, better fit human nature and therapeutic means of intervening in that they can more adequately account for the complexity of human experience and interaction (Keeney & Sprenkle, 1982). The fundamental changes in many fields of knowledge during the last century were largely informed by the premises of cybernetic thinking, especially around the idea of feedback loops.

Psychologists and behavioural thinkers, such as Bateson for example, were influenced by these ideas to shift towards a systemic view of human interaction. Systemic psychology, as its name suggests, is dependant on the concepts of general systems theory. Von Bertalanffy's (1968) general system theory described a holistic view according to which one would think of systems as consisting of smaller elements or subsystems, while at the same time also being a part of larger supra-systems. A person is then also viewed as a system, made up of many parts, just as he or she is likewise simultaneously a member of various living systems, such as a family, which are again a part of the larger systems of society, and so on.

Keeney (1979) also uses the premise of ecology to describe the way in which all things in nature are related to one another in a complex but systematic way. A systemic therapist will therefore look holistically at a complete system, with its parts that are related to each other in various ways and that all mutually influence each other, and watch for the here-and-now patterns generated between the elements. The context in which the person or part is found (the larger group or system to which they belong) then becomes an essential consideration in order to make sense of the behaviour and meanings of that part.

Hoffman (1990) refers to cybernetics as the brainchild of Norbert Wiener, the science of communication and control, which can also describe the activity of feedback cycles in human interaction. Systemic psychologists concentrate on these two-way, recursive feedback loops that make up the mutual participation of persons in an interpersonal system. It became essential then for systemic thinkers to replace the older view of mankind as a purely reactive being with an acknowledgment of the pro-active nature of human beings, who have the freedom of choice to act on the world and even choose to change themselves.

3.3 From systemic to ecosystemic thinking

Once again, this section is simply an overview of the shifts in psychology from systemic thinking to ecosystemic thinking. Terms and concepts referred to are used here to demonstrate the changes in epistemology and practice that took place in the field at this time. They will not be fully defined or operationalised here, but rather in the later sections which deal with the application of these principles to this study of aloneness and loneliness.

The shift from systemic to ecosystemic thinking was a step that took psychology closer to the wholeness that systemic adherents held fundamental. Systemic (or simple cybernetic) practitioners concentrated primarily on the members of a system, their characteristic patterns of interaction, their open-ness or closed-ness to other systems, their balance between stability and change, and the recursiveness and feedback integral to the operation of such systems. They were, however, still watching the family system from a position of being removed from it, such that their field of study was still considered to be separate from the studying mind (Auerswald, 1985).

Systemic psychologists had, however, made fundamental moves from the original basic assumptions of Newtonian thinking and some of these should be remembered. In place of focusing on an atomistic (Auerswald, 1985) and reductionistic understanding of human nature they were embracing an all-encompassing whole-ism. Keeney (1983) refers to this new emphasis as a focus on complete circuits in whole systemic patterns. As opposed to the earlier notions of linear causality, they were now working with the recursive causality of mutual influence. The next move would be to leap from the neutral objectivity of positivism to a viewpoint which recognised that observations made are always made by, and therefor influenced by, an observer (Maturana, 1980).

The change to ecosystemics came about with the realisation that one can not observe something 'out there' and know it as an objective truth. Hoffman (1985) refers to this as a false illusion of objectivity. Maturana's (1980) position on this is that anything said is said by an observer, and this is why he always used the term objectivity in parentheses. We can only talk about objectivity in parentheses, then, because true objectivity is a misinformed assumption. Hoffman (1985) cites von Foerster whose definition of reality is something which can only exist as a consistent frame of reference for at least two observers to demonstrate the way in which our shared ideas are consensually arrived at.

The shift from observing something separate from oneself to observing something in which one is actively participating is eloquently captured in the difference in emphasis between Von Foerster's 'cybernetics of observed systems' and 'cybernetics of observing systems' (Hoffman, 1985). Hoffman goes on to summarise this as the difference between 'first order' cybernetics, in which the observer remains outside that which is observed, and 'second order' cybernetics, in which the observer is included in the total arc of observations.

Ecosystemic (or cybernetics of cybernetics) thinking is then more true to the notion of wholeness in that the therapist is now viewed as a part of the system under observation. At this level of thinking the autonomy of a system precludes reference to an outside environment, because there is no 'outside' and the system can be said to be closed (Keeney, 1983). Not only is the therapist or researcher now aware of the subjectivity of any observations that he or she makes, but he or she is now also a part of, and a participant in, that which is being observed.

The therapist must now recursively analyse the whole system (self included) with an emphasis on the mutual connectedness of observer and observed. An important requirement of ecosystemic 'vision' is, now, the ability of practitioners to work self-referentially by acknowledging that the distinctions which they draw are based on their own personal frames of reference, values, beliefs, history, culture and other influences. This, then, is the argument for including the ecosystemic paradigm in this paper; the assumption that the author's punctuation of reality in all observations and interpretations will be made according to her epistemological premises, and these must therefore be made known.

If an objective knowledge of a reality out there is impossible, and our awareness is always subjective, then it must be accepted we participate in creating the only reality that we can come to know. Hoffman (1985, p. 383) adds that "our perceptions do not represent impressions of an out-there reality but construct this reality". It follows on, then, that every individual will potentially have their own unique view of reality; one which is different from any other because it has been created from a basis of their own personal punctuation of any 'reality' (Maturana, 1980).

Within the process of observation, we are inevitably interacting with that which we observe, and with other observers, such that we are co-creating our realities as we go along. If ecosystemic thinking holds that any number of observer-dependent realities are equally valid then we must conclude that we exist in a multi-verse of realities. At the same time it must be noted that human life would not be possible

without the negotiation of shared meanings between people (Maturana, 1980). People co-create shared, or consensual, realities together which allow them to communicate their experiences to each other (as will be done in this study) and to strive after shared goals.

Auerswald (1985) points out that the assumption of a monistic (as opposed to a dualistic either/or) universe introduces the idea of both/and, and is integral to the approach of Bateson's 'new' epistemology. This stance then allows the complementarity of both sides of the coin to be considered instead of insisting that either one or the other position should be taken to the exclusion of the other. This idea is linked to Bateson's notion of binocular vision (Bateson, 1979). It is from within this understanding of complementarity, which allows the inclusion of two different positions, that the author proposes to frame the conceptualisation, and the study, of aloneness and loneliness using both systemic and ecosystemic concepts.

This dialectical view of reality is further informed by Hoffman's (1985) understanding of how one can operate from within both the 'simple cybernetics' of original family therapy and the second order 'cybernetics of cybernetics' as long as a second order view of these interactions is maintained. The above author proposes that "one is always acting within both a 'second order' and a 'first order' cybernetics" (p. 394). Becvar and Becvar (1996) concur that, given the both/and thinking of the ecosystemic perspective, a practitioner can operate from within the two levels as long as an awareness of second order recursiveness is imbedded in his or her punctuation of reality.

The author will, therefore, be using terms from each of the two levels of cybernetic abstraction in as much as they are relevant to each topic under discussion. Some of the concepts below can be regarded as purely systemic ideas in that they focus more on observing a system (a lonely person's description of their experience, for instance) without the observer's impact on it. Others will again belong within the ecosystemic camp in that they describe a position from which the researcher is acknowledged as a participant in that which is being "observed" (an interpretation of existing literature, for instance). It is still possible for one's overarching viewpoint to be ecosystemic if one remains aware of when and where reality is punctuated from the one or the other level.

What follows is an outline of the systemic and ecosystemic principles that the author finds to be particularly meaningful for psychology, and relevant to the topic and aims of this paper. The author's understanding of the specific meanings of these principles, and their implications for the way in which

the work of this study will be executed, and then reported on, will be set out. This should allow the reader to follow the author's emphases in terms of focus, of how assumptions are reached around people, loneliness and the research of both and, lastly, of how the researcher, as the consolidating tool of this study, has contributed to the form of all questions and answers.

3.4 Relating ecosystemic principles to loneliness and aloneness

One may ask how the theme of people alone and/or lonely is an acceptable point of investigation for systemic psychology, a discipline interested primarily in interpersonal relations. The author would argue that anything which affects individuals, even when they perceive themselves as isolated, affects all other people as well. This perceived isolation of the individual impacts on the way that the larger community is integrated, just as the (sometimes limited) extent of community integration can also contribute to the experiences of lonely people. Sociology has always seen interpersonal relations as the mortar of a society, and the 'problem' of widespread isolation is seen as a large contributor to societal decay and downfall (Peplau & Perlman, 1982), issues often touched on in psychology.

Loneliness can be described as a self-perceived interpersonal problem where an individual's pain and suffering are often explained as due to a lack of, or a deficiency in, satisfying relations with others. The author relies here on Peplau, Russel and Heim's definition of loneliness as that which occurs when there is a discrepancy between desired and achieved social relations (Fischer & Phillips, 1982). It seems clear then that loneliness has, most definitely, to do with interpersonal awareness, and even aloneness must refer to others, in their absence, for its own definition. The understanding of 'satisfying relations with others' is surely also defined by the individual person in interaction with wider social discourses if not directly with other people. These co-created meanings may hold that being alone is unacceptable, or a reason for pity, and so inform our definitions of the specific nature of 'satisfactory' relatedness.

3.4.1 Systems

General systems theory describes a system as being made up of interacting elements which respond to one another in a self-corrective way (Haley, 1971). Keeney (1979) further defines a system as a cybernetic network that processes information and he cites Bateson's understanding of a system as any unit containing a feedback structure, and therefore competent to process information. Each and every part of a system has a continuous mutual impact on all of the others. Mankind can be viewed as a large

system of persons who are also interrelated and continue to have a mutual impact on one another.

When we look at an individual and attempt to understand his or her experience of either painful loneliness or comfortable aloneness we are also looking at system. Every person is a complex system of the biological, psychological and social elements of a human being (Barlow & Durand, 1995). These parts are all interrelated and they mutually impact on one another to influence the whole person and their experience of a feeling such as simple aloneness. At the same time each of these parts is itself a smaller system, also made up of interrelated parts, and so on and so on. This thinking is in line with Von Bertalanffy's (1968) general systems theory which describes a hierarchy of related systems which are all simultaneously subsystems and supra-systems of other systems.

Even the lived experience of loneliness can be viewed as a system. Many authors have presented a variety of loneliness typologies which emphasize one of three fundamental pictures of systems of loneliness. These concentrate on either the nature of the person's relational deficit (Weiss, 1973), the length of time that they have felt lonely (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1974) or an evaluative of the loneliness experienced (De Jong-Gierveld & Raadschelders, 1982). The aetiology of loneliness is also understood as a system of both predisposing and maintaining variables which function interdependently to compose the picture of an individual's experience of being alone (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1974).

Flanders (1982) uses Miller's General Living Systems Theory to create a systemic definition of loneliness. In terms of this perspective, loneliness is seen as an adaptive feedback mechanism for bringing the individual from a current state of too little human contact to a more optimal range of human contact in quantity and form. The author highlights the achieved-desired distinction of relatedness in this definition but warns that loneliness should not be eliminated as it functions as an essential warning sub-system with important survival values, similar to the experience of physical pain. This definition does not, however, go into detail as to how the 'desired' component of relatedness is defined. The author believes that the meanings around loneliness, as co-created with the wider social discourses, would play out here.

3.4.2 Recursion

The ecosystemic approach was influenced by Von Bertalanffy's (1968) general systems theory to move away from the old psychological focus on one small part of the picture to an emphasis on whole entities

or systems. A consequence of this wholistic perspective is that one would now look at a whole system, taking cognisance of all of its parts and of how they interact with, and impact on, one another. With all elements of a system acting upon each other in a continuing and recursive way then no one element can be said to have started off a **response chain** in a linear cause-and-effect manner. Rather, one can speak of the reciprocal causality and mutual influence of a true system that maintains a **circle of responses**. Bateson (1972) emphasised the idea that interactions between the elements of a system are not one-way connections, but rather two-way recursive feedback loops.

This change in interest can be described as a shift from seeking a cause (Why?) to seeking a description (What?) for that which is going on (Keeney, 1979, 1983). With a change in emphasis towards the process of mutual interaction and influence the therapist or researcher must then realign his or her aim to be that of highlighting the relatedness of parts. Finding this relationship between elements allows us to discover the meaning of a system in the manner that each element simultaneously defines the others and itself. The 'logical' conclusion of mutual influence in a system suggests that the idea of an element or elements being the originators of an outcome is replaced by an awareness of the shared responsibility of the patterned interaction between all elements.

The implications of the above are that an awareness of recursion will influence the researcher's views on everything pertaining to loneliness and aloneness, from their antecedents to their manifestations and even their 'cures'. Peplau and Perlman (1982) describe a variety of antecedents of loneliness such as changes in relationships or in relational needs, situational vulnerabilities and personal susceptibility. The ecosystemic psychologist would look for the reciprocal causality between many such possible contributors to any one individual's experience of being alone. The relationship between various elements, such as an individual's life changes and his or her emotional responses to them, might fulfill that person's criteria for experiencing either painful loneliness or simple aloneness as a response to his or her situation. For example, if an individual's needs for relatedness decreased with age, and the wider social discourses (Hoffman, 1990) held that older people desired less social interaction, then that person's conditions for responding with comfortable aloneness might be met.

Even in the manifestations of a person's loneliness can we find systemic recursion between the components of the presenting picture. Typical signs and symptoms of loneliness in the individual are listed as possible affective, motivational, cognitive, behavioural, social and medical manifestations (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). We can now expect that any number of these signs and symptoms could

be mutually impacting upon one another at one time. For example, an awareness of new social problems in individuals' lives could negatively influence their affective states, while these compromised affective states could also produce a drop in motivation and physical health as well. Each factor can influence this complex interactive system and no one part could ever control the whole system (Bateson, 1972). In this way a person might understand their own signs and symptoms of feeling lonely, along with the evidence that others also perceive them as loners, to add up to an aggravated and reinforced sense of loneliness.

3.4.3 Patterns

In looking for the reciprocal influence and interactions between the elements of a system we will start to see the patterns of connection that occur at every level of the whole. Keeney (1983) stresses the importance of pattern and form in a system, and the therapeutic (or research) question of **what is going on?** is a direct effort to describe patterns. By concentrating on the relationships between parts the observer-participant can become aware of and highlight the interactional patterns of a system. The simple observation of patterns in a system is more of a systemic practice than an ecosystemic one, but it can be viewed from an ecosystem perspective if the researcher remains aware of her being yet another part of this whole.

The question, then, is of where to look in order to distinguish the patterns that are formed by recurrent interactions and behaviours. Cybernetics allows us to think of the interactions between the parts of a whole system as its means of regulating and processing information. This information, or feedback, is not a one-way connection but rather the two-way recursive feedback loops that we would expect of a circular system. Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) define feedback as that part of the system's output that is reintroduced into the system as information about the output. Feedback is a recursive process that can generate different orders of circularity in loops of circular, or spiraling, information processes (Penn, 1982). It is in the feedback between the elements of a system, then, that we will discern its patterns.

For example, a young woman may, along with her social circle, have co-created a definition of herself as self-fulfilled only when she is in a relationship with a man. Were she to end her current romance she might receive feedback from her friends that she looks lonely and should find someone new. The young woman may then assume that having a boyfriend is an essential relationship, thus believing herself to

be lonely when her actual relationships do not match this criterion. Were she to establish a new relationship she and her friends would be in a position to view her as relationally satisfied and no longer lonely, giving feedback to confirm her new happiness. This process may then repeat itself every time she is single until she is attached again. In this system one can see the patterning of experienced loneliness through feedback which helped co-create the young woman's definition of desired relatedness.

We can now understand feedback as the process whereby information about past behaviours is fed back into the system in a circular manner. It can be further categorised as **positive** when it gives rise to changes in the system, and as **negative** when it brings about no change. In terms of the lonely individual's experience one could say that positive feedback has occurred when he or she first notices a discrepancy between desired and actual relationships and starts to feel lonely (a change). Conversely, negative feedback is seen when the same person's reassessment of his or her situation five years later finds that nothing has changed and that he or she still feels the same way. Keeney (1983, p. 48) further allows that, just as "information can inform (or feed back) itself" it also "commands a transformation such that (it) may be passed on to the next sequent or part in the circuit" (p. 51). This process is known as feedforward which can inform the next loop of behaviour.

3.4.4 Context

From within a truly wholistic perspective the researcher should find him- or herself focusing on the processes that give meaning to the events observed and participated in. Keeney (1983, p. 45) cites Bateson's assertion that, "if you want to understand some phenomenon or appearance, you must consider that phenomenon within the context of all completed circuits which are relevant to it". A researcher would need to understand that all of the pieces of a puzzle fit together to make up an image quite different to that which would be expected if he or she were to look at one piece alone. Loneliness itself lives in a relational context and anyone investigating it would need to look at lonely peoples' actual relationships, desired relationships and unfulfilled relationships to see the whole picture.

Gaev (1976) describes five specific kinds of loneliness, namely loneliness of the inner self and then physical, emotional, social and spiritual loneliness. To make sense of the presenting picture of an individual who is very alone, and without the physical presence of other people, a consideration of their context and therefor the 'bigger picture' is essential. We may be looking at a monastic recluse whose

definition of painful loneliness is very different to that of others. Such a person may not ever feel lonely if his sole requirement for a spiritual relationship with his deity is always satisfied.

3.4.5 Punctuation

The above point takes us on to the idea of an individual's personal and oftentimes unique definition of a situation. Keeney and Sprenkle (1982) remind us of the importance of definitions in that what we perceive and know is largely due to the distinctions that we draw. They go on to add that the habitual ways in which people punctuate their experiences will give us an idea of how it is that they draw their distinctions. A warning must be added that any person might categorise his or her experiences in an entirely different way to the researcher's typical style of punctuation. An interviewer will then only be able to understand another's experience by observing how that person's social and personal contexts are punctuated.

Another term for the act of punctuating an experience is framing, that is, how someone frames an experience. Loneliness has been described as that feeling which comes about when one is without some definite, needed relationship or set of relationships (Weiss, 1973). The important word here is 'needed', it sets the frame for understanding the meaning of relationships as they have been co-created in the wider social discourses (Hoffman, 1990). Social discourses of the time may hold that many close friendships are important, and an individual's conceptualisation of 'needed' relationships may be informed by this idea.

If loneliness is a result of the perceived discrepancy between desired and actual relational closeness then it clearly has to do with the punctuation of a situation which may be mutually reached by those in a system who converse around it. Many self-help authors even advise individuals on how to overcome loneliness by either learning to appreciate their solitude, developing a positive inner life or discovering the value of loneliness (Hritzuk, 1982; Leveté, 1993; Pothoff, 1976). These manoeuvres can surely be seen as attempts to 're-frame' loneliness away, or co-construct a new meaning around being simply alone (no longer lonely) with the reader.

3.4.6 Constructed realities

If people punctuate their own experiences personally, and rely on their own definition of a situation,

then we can expect that everyone's frame of reference will be different from the next person's. A step beyond this position would allow us to understand that realities can be shared between people and therefor co-created within the conversational domain (Varela, 1979). Ecosystemic thinking does in fact rely on these assumptions and it leans heavily on the ideas of constructivism and later constructionism in elucidating this point (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen 1997).

Hoffman (1985) herself suggests that our perceptions do not so much represent impressions of an 'out-there reality' but that we rather construct this reality ourselves. Also relevant is von Glasersfeld's (1995) supposition that people do not discover the reality of the world out there, but that they rather invent it themselves. The premise here is that a person assigns his or her own meaning to everything that he or she come into contact with, and that this meaning then represents 'reality' for that person. This meaning is furthermore determined by the individual and not by the topic or the experience under question so that many people, viewing the same scene, may take away very different impressions of the 'reality' of it.

Hoffman (1990) describes constructivism's underlying assumption as the idea that people construct their own versions of 'reality' instead of **recognising** some obvious and absolute reality 'out there'. We should now refer to a multi-verse of many observer-dependent realities which are all equally valid, instead of one objective universe that all can come to know in the same way. While all such 'realities' are considered to be equally valid, one 'reality' might be more useful than others for the researcher reporting on findings or for the interviewee putting his or her point across. We can now re-define perception as a process that is better understood as our ongoing invention, or construction, of our world. It then becomes imperative to acknowledge the assumptions and presuppositions according to which we create our 'realities', as this chapter serves to do for this dissertation.

Hoffman describes her understanding of the differences between constructivism and constructionism in her 1990 article and these will be referred to below. Von Glasersfeld's (1995) radical constructivism is based on the idea that an objectively knowable truth is not possible but that, instead, the construction of ideas about the world takes place within the individual's nervous system as it feels its way along. This position emphasises a very personal construction of reality that takes place within each individual and which is consequently unique to him or her. Constructionism, on the other hand, places much more emphasis on social interpretation and the interpersonally constructed meanings that people create together (Hoffman, 1990).

This second position assumes that we can share meanings with others and that this sharing of our network of meanings is our only way of connecting interpersonally. While people may hold on to their own different 'realities' at times, it is also possible, and often essential for survival, that they also construct a 'reality' together with others (Maturana, 1980). The sharing and co-constructing of these consensual 'realities' with others takes place through communication, and Hoffman (1990) acknowledges the great influence of language, family and culture here. One could argue that it is only through verbal and non-verbal language that people can reveal themselves to others and be known.

When many people share a view of 'reality', having reached consensus about an observation, it can be said that a consensual domain has come about within language. Varela (1979) talks about the ecologies of ideas that are created in the conversational domain, instead of in our skulls, because he views our understandings as being generated as a part of a social aggregate. He prefers to talk of the 'observer-community' instead of the individual observer, and in so doing escapes the likelihood of solipsism by bringing our realities out of isolation. Gergen, a strong proponent of social constructionism goes on to define the beliefs that we hold about the world as purely social constructions, which come about through communal interchange (Hoffman, 1990). Social discourses are, then, the shared ideas that have been built up through conversation with other people and are thus inter-subjectively co-created realities.

This study aims to capture a few individuals' own created 'realities' of their feelings around aloneness. Through discussions and questionnaires I will attempt to share in these individuals' constructions of their experiences and to become involved in constructing my shared understanding of their 'realities'. It is important to remember that these 'realities' have been created and co-constructed between themselves and others, even at times through the absence of others. It will be informative to include in the discussion participants' perception of the extent to which their own definitions of aloneness and loneliness have been co-created within relationships, and their experience of how the prevailing social discourses around being alone or lonely have helped shape their ideas.

Hoffman (1990) reminds us that all therapy, and therefore research, takes the form of conversations between people and that the findings of these conversations have no other 'reality' than that which is bestowed upon them by mutual consent. The validation of the author's understanding, and interpretations, of participant's stories must include a consensual conversation with them which has the purpose of confirming the co-constructed nature of the report. The author further expects that the reader will get to participate in yet another construction of the 'reality' of this study in his or her

reading, and punctuating, of the document.

3.4.7 Objectivity in parentheses

A perspective which allows multiple valid realities must also concede that there can be no objectivity or subjectivity, but rather a recognition of the observer's involvement in shaping that which he or she observes. In the epigraph to Ernst von Glasersfeld's 1995 book he quotes Heinz von Foerster's assertion that "Objectivity is the delusion that observations could be made without an observer". This understanding acknowledges the interrelatedness of the observer and the observed in a system which is not divisible into parts. There can be no question of one objective truth or reality which is correct and unquestionable when every person's observations are coloured by his or her world view, own behaviour and personal manner of observing.

Hoffman (1985) refers to the false illusion of objectivity that the entire Western outlook towards science had been based upon until the time of the new epistemology. She relies on Von Foerster's summary of the development of the cybernetics of cybernetics in which he compares 'first order' cybernetics, in which the observer remains outside of that which is observed, with 'second order' cybernetics, in which the observer is included in the total arc (Hoffman, 1985). Maturana (1980) agrees with this point and takes the position that we cannot escape the fact that in everything that we say and do, we are observers. It is for this reason that he would always use the term 'objectivity' in quotes, and that we now also speak of **objectivity in parentheses**.

This point relates to the study of loneliness and aloneness in that the researcher must remain aware of the dependent nature of all data gathered. The co-researcher's descriptions should not be viewed as subjective or as objective but rather as language-ing, that was co-created along with the researcher, within the context of a research interview. The final report and all interpretations made must also be viewed as a construction of the researcher in collaboration with the participants, and therefore as a relative and contextual reality which is but one version of that which transcended and was understood by all.

3.4.8 Complementarity

Leading on from the assumptions of multiple created realities and the relativity of the 'objectivity' that

we now have, we might contend that the question of any form of reality at all becomes doubtful. The solipsistic argument would offer that reality only exists in the mind of the observer and that any observations must be accepted (Meyer, et al., 1997). The ecosystemic student, however, recognises the recursive nature of observing systems and would counter that the different, parallel realities of each participant are his or her own (or shared) actual 'reality' that fits their world. Hoffman (1990) goes on to describe complementarity, a useful concept here, which she defines as the reciprocity of all elements (even those that may appear to be opposites) in a relationship.

The ecosystemic paradigm's dialectical view transcends either/or dichotomies to reach a position of recognising both/and answers (Auerswald, 1985). This allows the researcher to use the complementarity of both sides of coin, along with the relationship between them, in achieving an understanding of any phenomenon. Penn (1982) refers to Bateson's principle of double description and cites his understanding of it as taking views from every side of a relationship and juxtaposing them so as to generate a sense of the relationship as a whole. The present author's intention is to, similarly, use multiple descriptions (qualitative and quantitative, structured and unstructured) of the participants and their experience of aloneness to generate a sense of these relationships as wholes.

There is room for all possible perspectives and Becvar and Becvar (1996) go on to describe how other schools of thought in psychology can be used from within an ecosystemic framework. Their term 'theoretical relativity' refers to the usefulness of other theories and approaches in as much as they can give meaning to each other, and have co-operative advantages for any given context. Hoffman (1985) also talks of the 'second order' approach as having a high tolerance for difference. She adds that it is possible to incorporate methods from other orientations as long as one is clear, and self-referential, about what one is doing and why.

In terms of research, ecosystemic thinkers can now describe their goals as the exploration of different realities with research participants, as long as they themselves are also viewed as a part of the system being investigated. The principle behind the both/and reasoning of the 'new' epistemology allows the author to use both qualitative conversations and quantitative questionnaires as tools for collecting data, in as much as they are useful in that context. Meyer et al., (1997) add that constructivism makes it possible for us to be able to accommodate a quantitative construction as another reality and to regard it as one form of communication about the system.

3.4.9 Self-referentiality and conclusion

Self-referentiality is a concept that can admirably conclude this discussion of ecosystemic principles and their relevance to the current study of loneliness and aloneness. The author views this essential feature of ecosystemic thinking as the thread that binds all other presuppositions of ecosystemic theory together. Hoffman (1990) claims that it is impossible for the therapist or researcher to go into a conversation with no ideas in mind, that is a position of complete 'not knowing', and that it is better to be aware of the ideas that one does have than not to be. She goes on to say that the second-order view involves taking a position that is a step removed from the operation itself so as to be able to perceive the operation reflexively. Such a view can make one more aware of the manner in which one's own relationship to the operation influences that operation.

Referring to one's epistemology (or the knowledge of one's way of knowing) is self-referential, or, as Keeney (1983, p. 46) puts it "communication through (meta) communication is a self-referential process". Self-referentiality refers to the manner in which anyone who proposes a 'reality' remains aware of it being just that, their own punctuation of their own creation, and also acknowledges the recursive influence that they have had on every step of the process of interacting with this observing system. Walters (1990) reminds us that theorists and practitioners should always think and operate while fully aware of the values, subtleties, or meanings inherent in what they do, or how they think, and then refer to the influence that their selves may have had on their work.

This dissertation is, paradoxically, no more than assertions made about an epistemology from within that epistemology. Elkaïm (1986) grants that we cannot avoid being caught up in the paradox of describing a reality that we are actually busy constructing at the time. It is clear to the ecosystemic thinker that this kind of paradox is inevitable in any system of thinking inasmuch as such a system necessarily includes the thinker. Keeney (1983) adds that the shift towards including the observer in that which is observed, such that self-referentiality became essential, opened up the possibility of responsibility for the therapist and also made ethics an integral part of the ecosystemic position. This self-referentiality within the thinking system of the author, her paradigm and her construction (or dissertation), gives a sense of the system's autonomy, which can be seen as the highest possible order of recursion processes in a system.

3.5 Conclusion

The changes in psychological thinking, from the linear individualistic schools of thought to the circular nature of ecosystemic outlooks, set the context for this writer's varied exposure to different psychology paradigms throughout her studies. The shifts from first- to second-order cybernetics described above further highlight the current context of the author's understandings of the ecosystemic epistemology. This epistemology has stood out as the most useful, and personally relevant, approach to her work. Those assumptions of the author's epistemology which she considers to be most meaningful for herself as a trainee psychologist, and most relevant to the present study of the lived experience of aloneness, have been detailed and discussed.

In setting out the above assumptions the author has further experienced a re-confirmation of the systemic, and autonomous, nature of this outlook on a higher order of abstraction than had been previously known. The above exposition of the ecosystemic epistemology's assumptions demonstrates this circular pattern in that the assumptions themselves confirm the necessity of referring back to the whole epistemology in the form of a recursive feedback loop. It may now also be possible for the readers to position themselves within this outlook, to think about the way in which the context of their own epistemologies leads to the distinctions that they draw, so that they might observe their own system of co-creating that which is being read.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Loneliness is a crowded room
Full of broken hearts turned to stone
All together, all alone

- Bryan Ferry and Roxy Music - *Dance Away*

4.1 Introduction

The present chapter will deal with the aims of this study and the research design that will be followed in order to achieve them. The influence of the research styles that will be used to guide this process, namely heuristic and phenomenological research, will be discussed in terms of their emphasis on the description and understanding of human experience. These research styles have been selected primarily because of their fit with this particular research question and the author's qualitative, and interpretive, outlook for this particular inquiry. The interpretive model assumes a system of interrelated thinking and practice for the researcher in terms of his or her ontology, epistemology and proposed methodology.

Ontology designates the nature of the 'reality' under study and what we can come to know of it (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). This study aims to investigate people's subjective lived experiences of either aloneness or loneliness. One's epistemology designates the nature of the relationship between the researcher and that which is being researched. In this study the researcher will be adopting an interactional, empathic and inter-subjective stance towards the research participants. Terre Blanche and Durrheim understand that the methodology used designates how the researcher should go about studying that which is being researched, and that then is the topic of this chapter.

The author will be using qualitative styles of research which aim to describe the subjective experiences and meanings behind aspects of the research participants' lives. As a form of qualitative research, heuristic enquiry is mostly open-ended with each research process unfolding in its own way (Moustakas, 1990). Durrheim (1999) defines the research design as a strategic framework which plans and guides the research activity. The intended design of this study will be described, but, as a qualitative research design, it is more open, fluid and changeable than it is static. Pragmatic

considerations may change the design such that it becomes an iterative process in which the original plan can change.

The author's personal interest in the differences between the lived experiences of painful loneliness and comfortable aloneness will be set out, along with the overall rationale for this study. The research questions will be clearly exposed, and the research design will be made explicit in terms of the selection of subjects, instruments, the methodology, data analysis and final interpretations. The author's personal expectations and the assumptions contained in theory, if any, around this question will also be described.

4.2 Heuristic research

The term heuristic research comes from the Greek word *heuriskein* which means "to discover or to find" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 9). The research method used in this study will be guided mostly by heuristic methodology in that the intention will be to discover or to find out about others' experiences of aloneness. This type of research begins with a question or a problem that the researcher seeks to illuminate or answer. Moustakas adds that this type of inquiry is very often centered around an issue that has been a personal challenge or puzzlement for the researcher in her quest to understand herself and the world around her, as the current research question has been for the author.

Moustakas (1990) proposes that the investigator must have had a direct personal encounter with the phenomenon, an actual autobiographical connection with it and have experienced it in a vital, intense and full way. This would be in order for the researcher to have her own knowledge of the experience and how it occurred for her. Such knowledge keeps the researcher very close to the topic in terms of the intimate manner in which she can question another's experience of it. It can be expected that most people have experienced loneliness at times throughout the normal and sometimes predictable changes and challenges of life. The current author has personally experienced both painful loneliness and comfortable aloneness, often even seeking out the latter. The question of how, when and why it is that some people welcome and precipitate their own alone time whereas others are unable to stand even an hour of being without another person around have long been perplexing quandaries for the author.

The heuristic process commences with an internal search for the personal meaning and nature of the relevant experiences. After this the researcher will develop methods and procedures for the

investigation and interpretation of these phenomena as experienced by others. Moustakas (1990) describes how the heuristic research design and ensuing methodology will come from the researcher's personal meanings and inspiration with the topic. This assumption fits well with the ecosystemic paradigm's understanding of how the researcher's own punctuation, constructed realities and 'subjectivity' would influence any enquiry, and it demands that she make, and report on, any interpretations self-referentially.

Heuristic research necessitates the development of rigorous working definitions for the terms used, and the psychological phenomena that are to be investigated, and this should be done through extensive reading of the available literature on the topic. It further calls for the careful collection and validation of data, and a thorough and disciplined analysis of these products. Moustakas (1990) adds that the researcher should attempt to gather a full scope of observations and this point supports the use of different data gathering tools and methods in this study, in so far as they aim to provide numerous descriptions of the phenomenon under question.

Moustakas (1990) describes the intentions of heuristic research as the desire to understand phenomena with increasing depth, while the self of the researcher is ever present so as to experience growing self-awareness and self-knowledge as well. The entire heuristic process is a way of becoming informed, a way of knowing, enabling one to come to appreciate more fully what something is, or what it means, so that our comprehension and awareness of that phenomenon is extended. Such discoveries lead to new images and meanings around lived experiences, of comfortable aloneness for instance, and these realisations may be relevant to our own experiences and lives.

It is expected that this process will help to create stories which portray the qualities, meanings and essences of the universally unique experiences of the individuals involved in the current study. New descriptions of the human phenomenon of aloneness will be sought, along with an ability to see and understand it in a different way. Heuristic research allows one to reach deeper regions of the human problem or experience in question and come to know or understand its underlying dynamics and constituents more fully. Moustakas (1990) proposes looking for, and lifting out, the essential meanings of the experience for the person and this process will also be covered in more detail in the discussion of phenomenological research below.

The above process will require that the researcher recognise her self-awareness, value her own

experiences, rely on her resources and accept, as authentic, whatever opens channels for clarification on the topic (Moustakas, 1990). Fitting in with the requirements of ecosystemic self-referentiality, the researcher must indicate her contributions to the study findings in terms of thoroughly describing the process of selecting and implementing the research question, research design, data collection methods, interpretation or analysis techniques and the final report writing (Kaniki, 1999).

Moustakas (1990) advises the use of self-dialogue, tacit knowledge and intuition to identify with the focus of inquiry. It is then very important to remain aware of one's own internal frame of reference in as much as it influences one's way of knowing and understanding the nature, meanings and essences of human experience. Moustakas then leaves us with his belief that, while investigating aloneness, it will hover nearby and follow the researcher around, becoming a lingering presence in her day to day existence during the study. Only at this stage will one be ready to see, feel, touch and hear whatever opens one to a fuller understanding and knowledge of it.

4.3 Phenomenological research

Phenomenology has exerted its greatest impact on human science research through its rigorous descriptive approach. Giorgi (1997) proposes that it offers a method for accessing the difficult phenomena of human experience. Phenomenology is concerned with phenomena as they are experienced by the individual, in other words, something that presents itself to an individual's awareness must be understood precisely as it presents itself to the consciousness of this experiencing individual. Giorgi (1997, p. 238) adds that the phenomena "must be understood in their given modalities, as phenomena, that is, not as real existents".

The philosophical phenomenological method follows three steps in its process of description: phenomenological reduction, description and a search for essences (Giorgi, 1997). Phenomenological reduction directs the researcher to 'take a step back' and describe and examine every experience, even things and events which 'obviously' have existence, as a presence - something presenting itself in some way. In describing the phenomenon, Giorgi warns us not to explain or analyse data, but to simply describe what is given, where "a sufficiently rich description would include an intrinsic account of the phenomenon"(p. 242). The search for essence relies on Husserl's method of free imaginative variation which searches for the most invariant meaning of a circumstance, that which is essential for the object to be rendered to consciousness, without which it could not present itself as it is.

The descriptive phenomenological human scientific method, as a practical qualitative research procedure, holds implications for this study in terms of its recommended steps for doing research. Giorgi (1997) breaks these steps down into the collection of verbal data, reading of the data, dividing the data into parts, organising and expressing the raw data in disciplinary language and expressing the structure (essences and their relationships) of the phenomenon in some form of synthesis. These steps will be explained in more detail as and where they are relevant to the research method as set out below.

Kristensen (1995) refers to the appropriateness of phenomenological research methods for her study into the lived experience of childhood loneliness. In this endeavour she attempts to achieve a full description of this everyday event from the firsthand lived experience, and the viewpoint, of her participants. A phenomenological perspective emphasises the significance of describing and understanding human conditions (loneliness and aloneness) from the perspective of the experiencing individual.

In evaluating this research method it can be seen that it conforms to the requirements of the phenomenological perspective in that the researcher would work descriptively, reduce the phenomena and then search for invariant or essential meanings. At the same time it is recognisable as human scientific knowledge in that systematic, methodical, general and critical processes have been followed (Giorgi, 1997).

4.4 Aims

This study aims to investigate how it is that some individuals, in the same circumstantial experience of being relatively alone, feel neutrally comfortable, while still aware of their aloneness, while others experience varying degrees of painful loneliness. How it is that being alone, for sometimes extended periods of time, is alright for some and not for others. What this difference between loneliness and a simple awareness of aloneness is, and how people end up on the one side or the other. The intention of this study is to gather descriptions of the experience of painful loneliness from the literature and then contrast these with the descriptions given by research subjects of their lived experience of comfortable aloneness.

Ferns (1988) gives an account of Sadler's differentiation between five dimensions of loneliness, namely psychological, interpersonal, social, cultural and cosmic loneliness. The above question may be

approached by looking to these dimensions of loneliness for the distinguishing factors between them, if any, that might further suggest how one person could feel lonely while another could feel simply alone in exactly the same situation.

Psychological loneliness, above, is described as an experience of loneliness from even the self, where the individual feels that he or she has lost contact with him- or herself, or a part of him- or herself. A hypothesis of the author, here, is that some people might be able to live comfortably alone from others, and yet not 'alone from themselves', as would be the case in psychological loneliness. The assumption here is that this last dimension of loneliness might be seldom, if ever, experienced by those who almost always feel 'in touch' with themselves. These people may define a sense of loneliness which is painful as only this psychological 'loneliness from the self' dimension, such that they can be alone (with themselves) and truly not feel lonely. The research subjects involved in this study, who describe themselves as alone but not lonely, may experience interpersonal, social and even cultural isolation, but because these dimensions do not fit their definition of relational deficits they may feel relationally satisfied, and never lonely.

A further line of interest in this study will center around the implications that the experience of either loneliness or that of simple aloneness may have for certain roles that people play in society. This is based on the author's personal assumptions (and limited observations) that people who are inclined to feel painful loneliness may be more likely to seek therapy. The literature suggests that many people who seek help do so for their loneliness. Schwartz and Olds (1997, p. 94) add that "Loneliness is a common thread in the accounts that we hear from many of our patients". Similarly, Peres (1988) notes that loneliness is frequently encountered in therapy. Many other authors refer to the particularly disturbing nature of loneliness and describe it as a common contributor to both physical and mental ill health, for which the individual may or may not seek help (Hritzuk, 1982; Levet, 1993; Natale, 1986; Rubenstein & Shaver, 1974; Weiss, 1973).

It is useful now to link the assumptions and hypotheses of the present author with those of the literature on loneliness. The author speculates that psychotherapists who endure are more likely to be able to tolerate aloneness, or to find ways of managing loneliness, in many contexts. Literature confirms this and Buechler (1998) maintains that the analyst requires the same habits of mind as does the polar explorer, in terms of being able to stand aloneness. She explains that loneliness is a probable reaction of therapists because, at emotion- and pain inducing times, they can not have enough of themselves for

themselves to be of comfort. Therapists would then need to have active, imaginative minds, be able to occupy themselves and be nurtured and stimulated by selected reading in order to stand the loneliness of therapeutic inquiry. It can be assumed that this may also apply to the loneliness of the researcher.

Hoff and Buchholz (1996) suggest that the school psychologist should use deliberate 'alone-time' which could spur on creativity, both viable and flexible coping strategies which could lead to less stressed, more 'self-actualised' practitioners. Peres (1988) writes, from a psychiatrist's point of view, that the therapist often runs the risk of developing a working 'psychotherapeutic personality' which is not herself, and that she is therefore lonely because intimacy can not exist between herself and the patient. He adds that loneliness can also be a defence, protecting the therapist against emotional strife when each therapy ends. The therapist may then find ways, over time, to avoid loneliness by forming contacts with colleagues and the professional subculture, attending conferences and workshops, all of which can form a shield against the, oftentimes, very lonely experience of practicing psychotherapy.

4.5 Rationale

The author maintains that not enough research has been done on uncomplicated aloneness, and substantiates this argument with the apparent scarcity of literature on this topic, as shown in Chapter 2. The differences between painful loneliness and comfortable aloneness, if there are any, have not yet been thoroughly investigated and answers in this regard could grow our knowledge and comprehension of both experiences. Human scientists need a greater understanding of these states if they are to work legitimately with individuals' experience, or need at times, for either aloneness or loneliness.

From a thorough reading of the sources on aloneness and loneliness, as referred to in the above literature survey, it can be asserted that a comparative research task, such as the one proposed, has not yet been done on a case study basis to this date. The sources used may, nevertheless, present a point of departure for considering the question and its relevance to the body of psychological knowledge. Loneliness, as a psychological and social phenomenon, as set out in Chapter 1, has been well researched and described. There are also various case studies of lonely people which detail their experience of loneliness (Hamburger, 1983; Seabrook, 1975) and a few descriptions of the experience of aloneness for various subjects (Buchholz & Catton, 1999; Wilkinson & Pierce, 1997).

Library searches for literature on the topic of loneliness and aloneness did not, however, succeed in

discovering any work done on comparing the experiences of lonely subjects to those of others who felt comfortably alone in similarly isolated circumstances. Buchholz and Catton (1999), however, did investigate American adolescents with regards to their ability to distinguish between negative loneliness and neutral aloneness. The researchers found that the adolescents could, in fact, distinguish between the two states and that they gave very different descriptions, and examples, of being alone as opposed to being lonely. This study is very important in its contribution to the argument that painful loneliness and a simple sense of aloneness are two different possible reactions to the same circumstance of being alone. The authors do not investigate the difference between individuals who experience the one instead of the other, and this will form part of that which the current study proposes to do. From the above grounds, it can be argued that the goal of this research project has not yet been addressed directly, or fully, by any of the literature already found.

Ferns's (1998) recommendations for further studies into the subject of loneliness suggest the use of personal, unstructured interviews with participants. She proposes that such studies might contribute information towards our better understanding the subjective nature and experience of loneliness. It is exactly this, then, that the current study proposes to do: to compare the descriptions of the lived experience of painful loneliness from the literature to descriptions of the lived experience of comfortable aloneness and its subjective nature, as reported by the research participants of this study.

4.6 Sampling

As this is a comparative study, there will essentially be two different objects of investigation requiring definition at this point, namely the literature study and the sample group of participants. The study will collect descriptions of painful loneliness from the literature and then compare these to the descriptions of selected individuals' experiences of simple aloneness (Durrheim, 1999). The researcher will use a case study method for gathering raw data. This data will include the written and/or spoken words as gathered from the interviews with the research subjects and their scores on a loneliness measuring instrument which will be used descriptively.

Sampling will be purposeful (i.e. non-random) in that the researcher will select a few information-rich research participants who qualify as extreme cases of the 'target population' (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). To ensure that those selected are clear examples of individuals who live alone in relative isolation, when compared to the general populace, only people who possess this specific

property will be approached. The concept of relative isolation will be co-constructed by the author and the participants, and will be the first criterion for their inclusion in the study.

Suitable individuals will be those who have day-to-day conditions in which they live alone, even if they do work in an environment in which they have contact with other people. It is necessary that the subjects to be included in this study also self-define their own living conditions as relatively isolated when likened to others. These people might enjoy activities out, or even attend public gatherings such as church services, but they would need to readily describe themselves as leading relatively isolated lives when compared to people in general. In other words, the subjects will need to define themselves as 'relatively isolated' to be suitable.

The second deciding criterion for inclusion in this study is that the potential subjects would also need to report that they feel either comfortable or neutral when in this circumstance of relative isolation, and about their aloneness altogether. There may have been times when they did feel lonely, in this or another living circumstance, and they may even feel lonely at some time in the future, but subjects suitable for this study will be those who self-report that they are currently, and overall, mostly comfortable with their aloneness. The author will, therefore consider for inclusion individuals who live in relative isolation and who appear to be comfortable with this situation.

In searching for appropriate participants, the author's own client base at the UNISA training clinic, and then those of fellow students will be considered for inclusion. The intention is to involve between three and five research participants as suggested by Moustakas's (1990) and Giorgi's (1997) advice that it is desirable to use several subjects. If no suitable individuals, or insufficient participants, are found at the clinic, then people will be approached through associates or the author's work environment. The first step in the data gathering process of this study will then require the researcher to approach any likely participants to confirm their own definitions of their living contexts and their emotional responses to them.

Subjects who freely agree that they are suitable for the research, and are willing to participate in the proposed activities and for the proposed duration, will be involved in the later data gathering processes. Participants will be able to view questions similar to those that will be put to them to determine whether they would be prepared to discuss the subject matters involved. Withdrawal from the research project, although unfortunate, will be voluntary and at the subject's own discretion at any time during

the study (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999).

Other ethical considerations will also be made manifest to the participants and strictly adhered to by the researcher. To protect the welfare and the rights of the research participants their autonomy will be assured in that only voluntary and informed consent will be considered adequate for their inclusion in the study (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999). Their confidentiality will further be assured in that their identities and actual contributions, in the form of their interviews, will remain anonymous. Only the author will work with the raw data of the study, and her supervisors and external examiners will work with the typed, verbatim texts of these interviews.

The principle of non-maleficence requires that the research should do no harm to the participants or any other person or group, and the potential risks of emotional and/or any other harm to anyone involved has been considered and eliminated. Such factors have already been documented in the form of changes made in the research design so as to exclude the use of participants for descriptions of painful loneliness, where this might be more harmful than useful. The principle of beneficence further requires that the research be of benefit to either the participants or more broadly to other researchers and society at large (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999).

4.7 Measuring instruments

Both formal instruments of data collection, such as questionnaires, and an informal, unstructured interview will be used to gather the descriptions of comfortable aloneness sought by this study. The quantitative instrument to be used is the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3), a popular psychometric instrument for measuring loneliness (Ferns, 1988; Russell, 1996). It will, however, be used as yet another means of describing the phenomenon under study, and will not be relied upon for its predictive or diagnostic abilities. The two qualitative methods used will be the structured interview, created by the author around the assumptions and hypotheses of this study, and the undirected conversation with the participants where the process of the discussion itself will direct and constitute the information created.

Rokach and Brock (1997) refer to the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, et al., 1980) as the most widely used and cited scale of the clinical measures for loneliness. Amongst the original problems with this instrument were its same-direction (negatively worded) 20 items which could be seen as a bias

to the respondents. Another shortcoming mentioned by Rokach and Brock (1997) is the scale's treatment of loneliness as a unidimensional experience regardless of the various causes that might have lead up to it. As can be seen in Chapter 1, loneliness can be viewed from numerous approaches, some of which emphasise its multidimensional nature, and this limitation must be kept in mind when referring to participants' scores on the scale, and having to make interpretations from them.

The current UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) has been modified so as to contain 11 negatively worded (lonely) and 9 positively worded (non-lonely) items in order to balance out this direction bias (Russell, 1996). The author further points out that the double negative of some words or phrases, which was experienced as difficult by elderly respondents, was altered by reversing the content of those items. It is important to use this latest version of the scale as some of the study's subjects are in the late adulthood bracket in terms of age. This version has also been simplified in terms of the response format and the wording of the items, with the statement "How often do you feel" added at the beginning of each question so as to facilitate administering the scale via personal, or even telephone, interviews.

Russell (1982) does suggest that he and his co-researchers were successful at developing an adequate loneliness scale which is relatively short, easily administered, highly reliable and which appears to be valid both in assessing loneliness and discriminating between loneliness and other related constructs. The scale will, however, not be used in this study as an objective measure of the 'amount' of an individual's loneliness, nor to identify any proposed type of loneliness, but rather as another means of describing the lived experience of this phenomenon. It is expected that the scale results may also present the author an opportunity to corroborate data gathered from the other research methods mentioned above.

Russell (1996) presents analyses of the psychometric properties of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) which indicate the reliability, validity and factor structure of the instrument. The author states that this scale appears to be very reliable, with high coefficient alpha scores ranging from 0.89 to 0.94 across the different sample populations. Test-retest correlations were also high enough to suggest that no significant changes over a one year period took place. In all, the reliability of this third version of the scale appears to be favourably comparable to that of the earlier two versions.

Convergent validity has been demonstrated through highly significant correlations between this scales' results and that of other measures of loneliness in Russell, Kao and Cutrona's 1987 study, as cited by

Russell (1996). The author further quotes analyses which support the discriminant validity of this scale when compared to other measures of personality, for instance, depression. Construct validity has, therefore, been demonstrated for this scale and it argues that the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) does, in fact, define and assess a distinct construct. Russell surmises that the above psychometric data support the reliability and validity of this revised scale for assessing loneliness in a variety of populations. He adds that the above analysis of construct validity contributed evidence which is further consistent with theoretical models of both the determinants and the consequences of loneliness.

The qualitative methods that follow are based upon three specific themes inherent to qualitative inquiry. Durrheim (1999) defines the first, naturalism, as the study of real-world situations in which the researcher is open to whatever evolves out of the inquiry. Qualitative research is also holistic in that it intends to work with the whole phenomenon under study, understanding it as a complex system instead of reduced to variables and parts. The inductive nature of qualitative inquiry further proposes that the researcher begins by exploring with genuinely open questions, producing data into which she will later immerse herself so as to find the essences of the experiences studied.

Giorgi (1997) adds to our understanding of qualitative research by noting that it is a process which always seems to include a minimum of five basic steps. These steps are the collection of verbal data, reading of the data, breaking the data down into parts, organising and expressing the data from a disciplinary perspective and then finally synthesising or summarising the data for the purposes of communicating the researcher's findings. It will be possible to recognise the qualitative nature of the heuristic and phenomenological research steps and methods as set out below.

The structured interview will incorporate questions around the researcher's own assumptions, and hypotheses from the literature, regarding the lived experience of aloneness, and will attempt to address the questions inherent therein. These questions will guide the interview conversations towards issues such as how the subject defines aloneness and loneliness, the differences between the two, how some people experience the one and some the other, how it is they understand that they experience comfortable aloneness, what others think of their aloneness, under what circumstances, if any, they believe that they would feel lonely, discussions about other non-lonely people they might know and their ideas around the sort of individuals that they think are able to tolerate aloneness.

In the unstructured interview, or open-ended discussion, the author will be relied upon as the

conversationalist who helps to generate, and then record, discussion around the topic. Note books will be used to exactly record the portrayals given by the interviewees. Anderson and Goolishian (1992) describe a conversation (or interview) during which the subject's presenting narrative will always introduce the interviewer to the next question. A list of questions to use in this interview will, therefore, not be constructed beforehand, but the expectation is that the discussions will be driven by each interviewee, the interviewer and the conversational event itself.

It is merely a supposition of the author that alone people will be able to richly describe their experiences of comfortable aloneness, and it may turn out to be that the raw data generated reveals an impoverished style of interpersonal communication (one which may very well be contributing to their aloneness). On the other hand, there may be a wealth of information and new meanings around alone people's experiences of their lives and as much of this information as possible should be obtained in this study. The above diverse methods of gathering data should increase the chances of capturing descriptions of aloneness in some form, and then allow the investigation of any possible correlations between the products of different methods used.

4.8 Method

Use of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) will follow the prescribed methods of administration as indicated, and the current author intends to gather this data from subjects by presenting them individually with a printed page of the questionnaire on which to indicate their responses. The scale will be scored as described in Russell (1996), with higher scores taken to indicate greater degrees of reported loneliness. The scale is attached as appendix A. The structured questionnaire will be written up as a typed set of questions and probes for the researcher to use in a face to face interview, individually with each subject. The questions will address various assumptions already mentioned in this research study, and will seek each subject's opinions, understandings and assumptions around them. The structured interview questions are attached as appendix B.

The method to be used around the unstructured interview, however, needs a more detailed description here. The researcher intends to approach this question from a phenomenological point of view in that rich descriptions of different individual's immediate experiences of comfortable aloneness will be sought. The researcher intends to deal with the question of the manner in which the related emotional states are perceived and experienced by the people who claim to feel this way (Reber, 1995). This study

will examine the individual's relationship with, and reactions to, the "real world situations" of being alone in terms of their internal meanings, be they positive, neutral or negative (Durrheim, 1999, p. 43).

An interest, or curiosity, in the experience of comfortable aloneness will be used as a starting point for the dialogue to allow an opening of a conversational space in which it is hoped that the research participants will feel comfortable to share their story. The ideas for the type of approach to be used in this unstructured conversation are informed by Anderson and Goolishian's (1992) descriptions of narrative therapy. These authors argue that the traditional paradigmatic language of general psychology attempts to understand first-person experiences by reducing them to stereotypical, theoretical concepts.

Researchers might in so doing lose touch with the participants' locally developed meanings and constrain their stories. The researcher can avoid this by remaining attentive to the development of each person's language and metaphors which are specific to the phenomenon, and seek to understand their accounts from within these (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). To initially establish rapport, the interviewer will need to show an interest in the participants' accounts and be sure to remain curious about their version of reality. The intention here will be not to challenge their story, but rather to learn from it.

In the interviewer's responses, and attempts to clarify understandings, she will need to talk and communicate her sense of the story in the familiar language and vocabulary of each individual, so as to remain within the 'reality' of his or her story. She will need to stick to the rules of meaning as developed in the local conversation and move within the narrative truth of the participant's own accounts. The presenting interview narrative will always be used to provide the researcher with the next question, and the unstructured interview will be driven by itself, that is the immediate conversational event (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992).

Giorgi (1997, p. 245) also describes the process of unstructured qualitative research interviews as "more rambling and disorganized but more spontaneous". The researcher's questions, where there are any, are generally more broad and open-ended, seeking a detailed description of the subject's own lived experience. It is the aim of these discussions to gather candid and free descriptions of the participants' experiences of comfortable aloneness, aiming for greater depth and detail of understanding with each one, as suggested appropriately by Durrheim (1999).

4.9 Interpretation of data

Following Moustakas's (1990) outlines, it is proposed that the researcher gather all of the data from one participant at a time, so as to understand that individual's experience as a whole. After a rest period from the data, to allow for a fresh perspective, the researcher will need to construct her own depiction of that participant's reported experiences. In giving this overview it is important to retain the participant's typical language and to use examples drawn from the individual's life so as to enrich these accounts and make them true to the owner (Moustakas, 1990). A return to the original data will be necessary to ensure that the qualities and essential themes are still reflected in the portrait. Essential validation can be done by sharing this impression with the research participant for affirmation of its comprehensiveness.

It is possible to draw many comparisons here with Giorgi's (1997) description of the methodological steps used in phenomenological research analysis. He describes a holistic approach which requires the researcher to read through all raw data repeatedly before beginning with any interpretations so as to create a more global sense of the data. He goes on to add that the division of phenomenological research data into parts is based on meaning discrimination, from which one should be able to extract "meaning units" still expressed in the subject's own everyday language. Here he also exercises a search for themes which are essential to the phenomenon under study. The researcher's approach needs to be 'discovery-oriented' with an attitude open enough to allow for unexpected meanings to emerge as well. The psychologist's own spontaneity and professional sensitivity should be active in intuiting relevant meanings while working with the raw data.

The researcher would then be ready to move on to the next participant and repeat this process again for each individual. Moustakas's (1990) opinion that only the experiencing persons can validly provide portrayals of their experience will serve as a direction to remain true to the research participants' story through validating their accounts, and the researcher's impressions, with them before using any data. After another interval of rest, a composite depiction representing the common themes and qualities, if any, between the experience of the participants will need to be developed. The core qualities and 'life' inherent in the accounts of the experiences of the individual participants, and the group as a whole, can be retained through the use of "exemplary narratives, descriptive accounts, conversations, illustrations and verbatim excerpts" (p. 52).

It should then be possible to select, perhaps, between three and five participants who appear to exemplify the group as a whole, and to then develop individual portraits of these persons such that the phenomena investigated and the individuals themselves can be clearly envisaged. The researcher intuitively and reflectively sees, in all the depictions, the qualities or characteristic meanings that make the experience what it is and not something else, that which would enable one to know aloneness as aloneness as opposed to loneliness, for instance (Moustakas, 1990). The final step of the evaluation process will entail a creative synthesis of the whole research experience, in which the researcher can come to recognise her own developing awareness and knowledge of this phenomenon over the months.

Giorgi (1997) also proposes a process of analysis which can result in the expression of the fundamental structure of the concrete lived experience under study. This structure will be a formation of the meaning units essential to the phenomenon as well as the interrelationships among these parts. If the data lend themselves to this process, the researcher should also then try to derive a single structure (or synthesis) for all of the participants in the study. The same author goes on to suggest that phenomenological research should end with an expression of the phenomenon's structure re-described in disciplinary language, or terms relevant to ecosystemic psychology in this case, and from the perspective of the specific discipline. In concluding its research this study should aim to develop an aesthetic rendition of the themes and essential meanings of the phenomenon of comfortable aloneness, which can then be infused with personal significance and presented as the interpretations chapter.

Moustakas (1990) characterises the elements of a typical heuristic research manuscript as the introduction and statement of the topic and question, a review of the literature, a discussion of the methodology used, a presentation of the data and finally the summary, implications and outcomes of the study. The author has followed these guidelines for the format of a research manuscript in this dissertation. Moustakas himself studied loneliness, his own and that of others, from an heuristic perspective and he specifies the study of loneliness (and possibly aloneness) as an application for this model.

4.10 The research product

The product of this study will be an attempt to transform the research information gathered into the answer/s to the original research question/s (Durrheim, 1999). Each decision made in the research design should, furthermore, have been made so as to ensure that the results reported at the end of the

day are valid and believable answers to the originally posed questions. Of course, most of these decisions, such as the use of a certain epistemology, the context, the participants and their sampling will influence the so-called reliability, validity and generalisability of these results.

The author's opinion holds that loneliness and aloneness are experientially different and that some people predominately experience either the one or the other in response to comparable isolation. By investigating the differences between the two states the above opinion helped shape the author's assumption that this should be true for other people as well. The choice to use extreme case selection of participants surely biased the findings in a direction that might not hold for persons who feel alone and comfortable in, for example, an empty marriage. The heavy reliance on qualitative methods, and the descriptive use of a quantitative measure, will furthermore have likely produced different findings to those that would ensue from a purely empirical experiment.

Qualitative research relies on a different science of design and has its own expectations for the production of quality research. Instead of reliability, the qualitative researcher can talk of dependability which refers to the degree with which the reader can be convinced that the findings did occur as portrayed (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999). Rich and detailed descriptions that acknowledge the contextual nature of all interpretations reached work towards this goal. In place of validity, the credibility of findings can also be determined by how convincing and believable they are.

Study findings based on the qualitative, descriptive experiences of a few purposively selected case studies can, besides, not be generalised to a broader population because they will not be representative of a population. They should, instead, be understood as that which they are, that is detailed, subjective illustrations of individuals' experiences. Such qualitative findings should be transferable in that the understandings that they offer can be transferred to new contexts, and other studies, where they can serve as frameworks for understanding new meanings (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999). Transferability is promoted by the creation of rich descriptions which are, further, detailed as to context and participant characteristics.

4.11 Conclusion

In this chapter the overarching research paradigm was set out and identified as being qualitative in nature. The aims of the study, along with the rationale behind it, were set out so as to orient the reader

to the proposed study's outline. The two research models that have influenced the methodology of the study, namely heuristic and phenomenological research, were described in as much as they will be prescribing the actual processes of data generation, collection, analysis and interpretation. The researcher's responsibilities in terms of sampling and the use of measuring instruments were defined and discussed. All of the above will be kept in mind when performing the interpretation of final data so as to render the research product credible, dependable and transferable.

5. INTERPRETATIONS

Walked out this morning
Don't believe what I saw
A hundred billion bottles
Washed up on the shore
Seems I'm not alone in being alone
A hundred million castaways
Looking for a home.

- The Police - *Message in a bottle*

5.1 Introduction

As the product of qualitative research guided by the principles of phenomenology and heuristic research, these interpretations will seek to richly describe the participants' many experiences, and created meanings around, comfortable aloneness in their lives. Some interviews will have further included accounts of the loneliness that some of the participants may have known and these experiences and meanings will also be captured. These analyses will, however, endeavor to follow the proposed question and methodology and focus on sourcing the descriptions of painful loneliness from the literature and the descriptions of comfortable aloneness from the accounts and responses of the participants.

It is the object of this chapter then to, firstly, put across for the reader the essences of the participants' experiences of their time alone in a few paragraphs that concentrate on the themes that emerged from their interviews around what they think and feel about their aloneness. The participants' histories, experiences, meanings, descriptions and socially constructed values around aloneness, and possibly loneliness, will be brought together as they have been understood by the author. Secondly, shared themes or categories which appear to be common across all or most of the participants' accounts will be recorded. These mutual experiences of, and meanings around, comfortable aloneness, and possibly loneliness, stand out clearly and need mention here in as much as they might be shared similarly by other people who are comfortably alone.

Thirdly, rich descriptions of specifically the lived experience/s of comfortable aloneness, as understood

by this author from the interviews shared with these participants, will be detailed and discussed. At this point the range of lived experiences of painful loneliness, as described by various authors in chapter two, will also be revisited and detailed in a similar fashion. This will allow for a comparison of the descriptions given for each of these states, and for conclusions to be drawn around what may be different, if anything, between them.

5.2 Conversations around aloneness

In line with the ethical considerations discussed in Chapter 4 the participants' confidentiality will be maintained through their identities and their actual contributions, in the form of their responses and the texts of each interview, being excluded from this dissertation. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure that the reader still has a sense of the individuality and the personhood of each participant. The subject matter of this study is very personal often including life stories, the parts played by significant others and the sharing of deep experiences, thoughts and meanings around lives which are, by their very nature, particularly private.

It is in respect of this the above that the research participants were guaranteed full confidentiality, and assured that only the author would work with the raw data while her supervisor and external examiners will work with the typed, verbatim texts of the interviews in which they were involved. In warranted cases, readers may apply to the author and her supervisor to view these texts, or parts of these texts, and such requests will be considered.

5.2.1 Sandra

Sandra is a 57 year old woman who has lived alone in her own home since she got divorced from her husband 13 years ago. She works as a software programmer in the information technology industry and takes her work very seriously. She presented as an attractive, friendly and gracious person who was not, however, too confident about how well she does live alone comfortably but still eager to participate and tell of how she does manage. Her story is punctuated by much ambivalence around the meanings that being alone holds for her and the current experiences of aloneness that she has.

Sandra's meanings around living alone tend towards negative connotations and the idea that it is an unhealthy way of life, possibly for herself as well. She believes that much of the sickness in the world

today is caused by so many people being alone and that it can breed all sorts of problems. In her opinion living alone is not a natural state for human beings as she views us as social creatures who are meant to be meaningfully involved in families, cultures, religions and societies. Sandra has been alone or lonely at various times throughout her life and the dissatisfaction that she experienced then might have helped to create her current beliefs about aloneness.

Her past experiences with aloneness included her perception of having lived alone for all of her life, even when she was with her parents. She was an only child and quite alone in that sense, and then also perceived her father as "absent" when her mother divorced him early on in their marriage. This allowed Sandra to see her mother, who was a very independent woman herself, live alone for most of the time and still manage. In this way Sandra got to witness and experience independence at a very young age and this may have led to her belief that one can get "conditioned" into being alright with aloneness. She argued that one "can get used to it" and added this meaning to her appreciation of how she can live alone.

Apparently, as a child, she chose a best friend who came from a big family, in a sense to balance out her unmet needs for relationship, and always envied their "family-ness". Sandra claimed that she would not have chosen the lifestyle that she has now and that she would actually like to have someone to share things with. Her story centered around how she used to crave the family life that she had missed as a child, and how she would have liked to have had a husband and children. Throughout the conversation it sounded as if she would have chosen a life of connectedness with others for herself, but "It just didn't happen that way." Sandra did appear to value relationship and closeness as something desirable and she told a story of regret for not having lived more of such a life herself.

Despite this clear "reality" of hers that life is meant to be lived with people Sandra tells a very different story of her current needs for relatedness. For her ideas to have changed so much would require that she had re-constructed (possibly co-constructed) her meanings around belonging and being alone at some time. Sandra reported that her marriage in particular had made her very pessimistic about relationships, especially with men. She recalls having felt all alone again in her marriage to a man who she says "shared absolutely nothing" with her and she now maintains that simply having someone around does not mean that one will not be lonely. She portrayed the changes that have taken place in her outlook towards others in saying that she likes human beings less these days and is cynical about their nature.

Sandra spoke a lot about the “lessons from life” that she had learned through her marriage and the struggle that followed for her to remain financially independent and professed the very isolating message of “you have got to look after yourself”. From these hardships she has learnt to perceive others as “unreliable, insincere and superficial” and she finds herself being confrontational and less flexible in response these days, something which she has to “tread carefully” in to maintain good relations at work. Sandra admits that this distancing attempts “a certain amount of self protection” from a “man and woman relationship”. In a sense living alone has become an issue of survival for Sandra in that she can then commit to her work and thereby ensure her financial security, and also be spared the possible pain of relationships.

Along with the meanings that Sandra has created around being alone go her current experiences of this state and these show up much ambivalence. On the one hand she claims to get irritated by too many people nearby, big gatherings and children all around her. Even her work was chosen to be something she could do alone, as she does not like much contact there and prefers to be alone in her office. On the other hand Sandra admitted that she can have negative reactions to her aloneness and even possible depression from it sometimes, “To a certain extent I am lonely” she added. She described how living alone can make her obsessive at times, when just being with her own thoughts has her dwelling on unpleasant things.

Then again she would switch back to telling of how she is selfish of her time alone and feels angry resentment at having to do so much for her mother. Her positive experience of being alone comes across in statements about how she appreciates her privacy, when she can do what she wants to do when she wants to do it. Her story included the strong desire to just have a weekend alone, to have time to herself, and she complained that she is too busy these days to do so. Sandra also pointed out her “fantastic friends”, with whom she controls the regularity of contact, and who ensure that she is not “actually so alone”. She has balanced out aloneness over the years with friends, colleagues and, for example, working for the disabled society where she enjoyed the fellowship, being part of a team and making a contribution back to society.

In terms of managing her aloneness now Sandra claims that she copes with it because she has to, and maintains that if she was not managing she would be out there trying to change it. She did seem to view this aspect of her life as something over which she has control and explained that if she wanted people around herself sufficiently that she would seek them out. She described her own sense of living alone

as having reached more of an acceptance of it than being comfortable with it. Sandra could see the ambivalence, undecidedness and mixed feelings that she has around being alone and concluded herself that "I suppose that I am actually my own worst enemy in that way". She acknowledges the fluctuations in her experiences of aloneness, and needs for relatedness, and admits that there is a conflict in her messages. Sandra summed it up in her belief that her aloneness as "self-inflicted", unfortunately still a somewhat negative conclusion on the lifestyle that does serve important functions for her and that has been made sense of through the creation of much personal meaning.

5.2.2 Gail

Gail is a 51 year old woman who is unmarried and has lived alone in her own home for the past 21 years. She is a qualified speech therapist who is now working for the department of education with school teachers who specialise in teaching English as a second language. Gail introduced herself as someone who has been very comfortable living alone, and added that she has a circle of single friends who are also happily alone and who she was sure would be willing to participate in the research as well if needed. From this starting point it was clear that Gail has set up a lifestyle, and set of circumstances, which facilitate her living alone as comfortably as possible.

Gail described herself as someone who has lived alone for most of her adult life and whose experience of it is now one of enjoyment. She claims to live more alone than the other people she knows, even spending more time alone than the other singles she knows. In explaining this she set out how she sees her own behaviour as very different from that of a single friend who can not stand aloneness and has a great need for company, and from that of her brother who chose to marry very young and have children. Gail understands the differences in tolerance, and need, for aloneness between people as stemming from both "personality and circumstantial" origins. She sees her independence as a trait that makes it possible for her to be alone, to have coffee alone or go to a movie alone when she wants to.

Along with Gail's personality, which may make aloneness easier for her, go the other 'voices' in her life which have co-created her meanings around aloneness as something which is acceptable. She claims that her home taught her independence with her parents, who "were very independent people themselves", having always been happy with whatever life she chose for herself. Gail also sees the women's liberation movement as a social discourse which played a large part in making her life as it is possible for her. Our current modern era's emphasis on individuality has, likewise, contributed to

endorsing Gail's lifestyle and she acknowledged her sense of this, that "society today allows for much more singleness".

Gail views her advancing age as another ingredient of her comfortable aloneness and she contrasted her childhood experiences with those of now to highlight this. As a child she remembers having been alone more often than she "would have liked" and having not enjoyed being alone. Gail was very young for her class and accepts this as the reason for her having to work so hard, leaving no time for friends. From her teenage and university years onwards, however, she was more social and involved with others. Gail sees age, getting older, as something which has helped her to be "much more comfortable" with aloneness. She admits that her priorities have changed, as in getting to "an age when you don't want to have children anymore". Her values have also shifted, "you do just want different things at different times", such that she may now value aloneness more, and finds herself spending more time alone and going out less.

Gail believes that comfortable aloneness is something that one can "grow into" but that there is a process of creating meaning around aloneness that is necessary for being alright with it. She held that, between being a young person, expecting marriage and a family, and where she is now, there must be a process of recognising and accepting that "this is my life", "my home" and "how it is" and making new sense of these. Gail said that she has been able to do this, to "take stock of my life", "look at what is available to me, what positives there are" and "be thankful for what I have got". She claims to have developed a lifestyle which allows her to be comfortable with her aloneness and, that, "It's all about making meaning out of one's life."

Gail also spoke about the circumstantial elements of her response to aloneness and admitted that the events of her day influence her need for contact. She has learnt to recognise the "indicators", the feeling that "It looks like this day is going to stretch", which tell her that she should perk herself up or start to do things to avoid, or combat, feelings of loneliness or depression which might come on. Gail asserts that she then "pro-actively" does something such as 'phoning up a friend, listening to music, the radio or happy songs which help her to keep contact, keep abreast of new things or just make her own company.

Making face to face contact has also been easy for Gail. She described her "reliable ability to make contact easily" saying that she knows herself to be more comfortable and successful at making casual

contact with people than others that she knows. She can, for instance, just chat anyone in a queue if she wants to. Gail claims that working in a place which offers her a lot of contact with people makes it possible for her to live alone. She has this contact with people at work and can see her friends afterwards if she wants to as well. She claims to always seek out ways of getting to know people when she is new in an area. Doing volunteer work has offered her the opportunity to meet others, a sense of camaraderie and of achievement for making a contribution and putting something back into the community. Gail said that she had gone out of her way to “cultivate the **other relationships**” in her life such as with friends and with God who she said “doesn’t leave you feeling all alone”. She does seem to have a strong sense of connectedness to society and a purpose in life and these make living alone meaningful and comfortable.

Gail contends that she did not “set out” to live alone, or not get married, and emphasises that her aloneness was not a choice but rather “just how it turned out”. This insistence on her aloneness being not a choice may suggest that it is not her preferred reality and that she has some regret. She indicated that in her earlier life she would probably have chosen to marry and have a family but that her feelings about this kept on changing at the time. She added that she would, even now, probably make different choices for her life despite being “mostly happy with the way it turned out”. Gail admitted that there was ambivalence in her wish to have lived her life differently and claimed that her aloneness was not something that she felt guilty or negative about.

Gail added that she can see herself in the future, living alone for the rest of her life in a retirement village and happy as long as she can keep busy. This keeping busy does seem important for Gail to remain happy living alone. She described how she has to have something new to do and how her working in an applied field now allows her to learn something different and enjoy variety at work. She has apparently studied again, at various stages in her life, simply for her own enjoyment and has taken community courses and done volunteer work to keep herself stimulated. She likes to start doing new things and understands her “ability to see new ways around things” as part of her ability to be alone.

Gail seems to have had a rich and interesting life and reports having had both positive experiences of coping alone and terrible loneliness in which she needed to change a lot of her life to get out of it. Knowing both she describes comfortable aloneness as very peaceful, as in when she relishes having “a whole day at home alone” or enjoying her “switching off time”. She highlights the freedom of being able to make all of the decisions in her life, of being able to do whatever she wants to without having

to consider anyone else. Gail is also able to see what things being alone has made possible for her. She has been able to travel a lot, something which she loves, and even take more risks with her own behaviour when overseas, something she was quite excited about. She can also see the complementarity of how being alone allows her to work long, hard hours while working with so many people allows her to live alone. In all, Gail appears to be someone who has investigated her aloneness and created meanings around it which free her to live it with comfort and just a little ambivalence.

5.2.3 Brother Desmond

Brother Desmond is a 27 year old deacon in the Catholic church who was about two months off being finally ordained into the priesthood at the time of the interview. He told of how he has lived alone, and away from his family of origin, for the last nine years during which time he has undergone his training to be a priest. Brother Desmond lives in a church house, which is also home to another priest, but he is often left alone there as the more senior person travels a lot. He claims to be very comfortable in his aloneness about 95 % of the time, but has also known loneliness.

Brother Desmond explained further that he has “various experiences” of aloneness and that these range from being comfortable to being quite uncomfortable with it, in the sense of loneliness. He can see how the current events of his life, such as “work load and stress factors”, have an impact on his possibly feeling lonely in response to time spent alone, and knows this pattern in himself. He presented as a very self aware young man who was familiar with introspection, possibly through the training for his vocation, and had already examined much of his belief system around time spent alone and needs for relatedness with others. He maintained that aloneness has benefits of increased self-knowledge from time spent with oneself, and his own contemplations have impressed upon him the uniqueness of all people.

Brother Desmond described being aware of his simultaneous needs for aloneness and for communication with other people, which he finds are imperative for him both personally and professionally. On the one hand he maintained that “being alone is an essential part” of his spiritual life and that it was important for his own well-being as well as the effectiveness of his work as a priest. He claimed that he has gotten into the habit of booking off “an hour every day to be alone, deliberately to spend time with the Lord”, and he believes that without this his ministry could become ineffective. Brother Desmond asserts that this one hour a day, of time “to create an opening, a space” for God to

come in, allows him to “stay in touch for the rest of the day”. The meanings that Brother Desmond has around spiritual life and his work as a priest have made it possible for him to create a reality in which time alone is viewed as valuable and even essential.

As a part of their spiritual life, priests are expected to go on “retreats” which are specified periods during which they stay alone and in silence. Before being able to take his final vows Brother Desmond had to go on a retreat of 30 days and he recalled how very intense this experience was. He described it as a mixture of feelings, an experience that goes up and down, and takes you from “desolation to consolation, joy and peace”. During this aloneness he got to look at his life in perspective, where he had come from and where he was going to, having to face his problem areas that needed attention and the positive areas that could be encouraged. Brother Desmond remained certain that this experience was essential for him to be able to understand and accept others in his ministry.

To emphasise the impact of such time spent alone he also told of an inpatient at a drug rehabilitation center who was prescribed imposed isolation and who later professed that this had been necessary for him to come to know God. In his aloneness this man had to “face himself and grapple with who he was” and then make peace with that, and Brother Desmond believes that this is not always easy. He also told an historical church account of a man who spent a traumatic twenty years alone in the desert to return to work for the people to their great benefit. These examples, along with his own experience, contribute meaning to his reality that “there is benefit in spending time alone” which he sums up as “an energising experience” that is “important and essential” for himself.

On the other hand, Brother Desmond then also related his “inherent need to communicate” his “deepest self to another person” and described how, if this is not possible for a long time, he can experience an uncomfortable sense of loneliness in response. Brother Desmond appears to have created meaning around loneliness as the likely result of an ongoing lack of significant communication with another being or God. His close and continuous relationship with God may be able to account for how he claims to feel loneliness so seldom. Brother Desmond had described how he strives “continually to pray at all times” and this does substantiate his experience that he is “never completely alone because the Lord is always with” him.

Brother Desmond professes to having “a deep interest in communication”, which he believes is an essential part of being human. He views it as a measure for real friendship and as “a good solution to

many problems". His own deep need for communication may be satisfied through his contact with God even when he is without open and honest contact with others, allowing him to be alone comfortably. Brother Desmond regards his speaking, thoughts, emotions, feelings and gestures as his communication to God, and any experience, such as reading God's word, receiving sacrament or encountering people as God's communication with him. In a sense this two-way communication could be constant and ensure that one always has contact. In fact, Brother Desmond envisions that aloneness should get easier with time and that people can learn to cope with it. In that one can grow in maturity and in the depth of one's relatedness to self, to God and to others he feels that one should be able to lessen the chance of loneliness.

Brother Desmond went on to share his belief that uncomfortable loneliness might come from a lack of good communication. He portrayed hell as "a place where there is no possibility of communicating with another being or with God", and heaven as effective communication. He added that he would view the quality of someone's communication with others as a measure for that person's ability to be comfortably alone. Brother Desmond agreed that one's ability to be fully with another person should make it possible for one to then be comfortable when alone and he believes that his whole family share this "capacity for being alone and independent, and then also being together". In maintaining that a balance between aloneness and contact is necessary he recognises the complementarity of both sides of the coin of relatedness.

As a child, Brother Desmond believes that his constantly "having company", as a member of "a big family with five children", made it possible for him to be "very comfortable with aloneness". He remembers a nursery school teacher having described him as "rather independent, and alone more often than the others" and imagines that even then aloneness must have been quite comfortable for him. His training in music also provided him with early experiences of aloneness in that he would practice for up to two hours a day and have to exercise disciplined concentration and directed attention at these times. Brother Desmond appreciates that in the moment of playing music "you are all on your own, even if there are people around you".

In reflecting on the interview Brother Desmond allowed that he can conceive of many different ways of being alone. One can be alone and feel either comfortable in it or uncomfortable and desolate. Or one can be in the presence of others, but alone, and feel either comfortable and secure or lonely and insecure. As such Brother Desmond associates isolation, in the sense of separation from others or God,

with loneliness - and solitude, in the sense of being alone with God, with aloneness. He admits that his daily intention is to seek out solitude, as a space for encountering God, and contemplation, as his way of praying which is “linked to seeing, or having an experience of, God.” Overall, Brother Desmond’s religious belief system makes up a great part of the co-created meanings he has for aloneness, and he admits that his vocation helps him “with managing, making sense of, giving meaning to and choosing to use time alone” in his life.

5.2.4 Dianne

Dianne is a 43 year old single woman whose fiancé died two weeks before they were to be married, making her decide to rather live her life alone from then on. She presented as a friendly, easygoing person who was very open about the story of her life and how she had come to live alone and make sense of that. Dianne reported having spent much time alone over the years and having always experienced this as easy, even fulfilling, in that she is happy with just herself and has achieved so much in this way. Keeping busy was a strong theme throughout her accounts and it featured in her understandings of how she manages time alone. Dianne did report having felt loneliness at times in her life but this appears to have been in response to unfortunate events rather than from simply being alone.

Dianne started off by describing how well she can be alone, something that she experiences as “so great” for herself because of the number of things that she can do with this time. Dianne claims to be comfortable with aloneness as long as her hands and mind are busy, and she actually guards this “time out”; time for herself. She described how her mind would be going the whole time with thoughts and feelings and how she experiences this mental activity as so unlike loneliness or boredom. Dianne clearly accepts that she can be her own company, which she spoke of as being in the presence of her aura and being able to have “mental communication” with herself. This makes it even easier for her to have company if she does not have to say her thoughts to share her emotions with anybody else, if she can just think them to herself.

Dianne added that she does, however, enjoy both “people being around” and being on her own, and that she has never viewed herself as completely alone because there have always been people around her and she can communicate easily with anyone. She maintains that living alone has not excluded her from family contact either, especially with her sister and her sister’s children, and she described how she enjoyed their company. Dianne told of how the children of her town house complex always come to

play with her, but admitted that she does tire of this after a while. Having “too many people around”, or for too long, is something that seems to have bothered her since at least her university days, and living alone she is able to control the contact that she has with others, a choice which is an important part of Dianne’s reality.

She feels that she “Would have liked to have had children” but that she would be open to adopting some if she met the right person. Ideas of family and marriage brought Dianne to the saddest part of her story; the loss of her fiancé. She had been engaged to marry Trevor, a man who was so special and irreplaceable to her that, after his death, she decided to spend her life alone if she could not be with him. Dianne’s family were supportive of her in this decision and they understood that her desire to remain single was only due to having lost her fiancé. She claims that, even now, they do not put pressure on her to marry, or have a problem with her living alone, and in this sense they seem to have helped co-create and preserve her reality of life alone if not with Trevor.

Dianne describes her living alone as something which has always been her choice. She had wanted to get out of her parents’ home when she left there, and had then chosen to live alone since Trevor’s death as well. She emphasised that she chooses to live alone because she wants to, and for good reasons, such as to relax, get her thoughts together and do her own thing. Dianne maintains that she does not have to live alone, but she does believe that if one were forced into being alone one could become lonely. In a way her “personal loss” of Trevor did, however, ‘force’ her into being alone from him, and she did report having felt “ultimately alone” at this time.

At other times the circumstances of her life have also led Dianne to feel lonely. In her previous job as a theater technician operating the stage flyers she had apparently “made the hole” that a well known performer accidentally fell into, seriously injuring herself. Dianne then had to defend herself as innocent of responsibility for this incident and she described the process of the court grillings as a very lonely time for herself. She even went to visit the performer in hospital every week and experienced a sense of aloneness and loneliness in not being able to do anything for her. Dianne described going through this period as her “loneliest time”, not for having been without people but for having been so inside of herself.

Being alone, however, has been a familiar state for Dianne even since she was a child. She describes aloneness as something that she “learnt to deal with early on”, having had three siblings who were

much younger than herself. She claims to have had “very little in common” with them and to have gone off in her own direction from then on. Entering the theater also provided her with many experiences of aloneness, strange as that may seem. Dianne explained that, during her time as a performing artist, her acting had been a way to “hide behind” a wig and make-up because she had been so shy. She also added that theater people spend so much time together intensely that they then like to be alone a lot. She admitted to the ambiguity of a career in which one works with people but actually on one’s own, “creating a world around you”. Later on, in her much longer theater technician job, she also got to experience aloneness during the long lighting sessions and when “four floors above the stage, alone, in the dark, behind a computer” controlling the scenery of a production. Dianne admitted that this could be a miserable and frustrating form of loneliness but that it did, however, go with the job.

Dianne then told of the things that help her manage being alone. She believes that having maturity (not age), mental strength, mental activity and the right mental attitude help her to handle the loneliness of her job by “getting on with” what she has to do and enjoying it. She added a strong assertion that anyone can manage loneliness, if they want to and put their minds to it, that they just have to find something to stimulate themselves. She felt that loneliness is not caused by society or conditions around one as much as it is caused by what the individual makes of those circumstances. Dianne herself keeps very busy, having many interests and doing lots of things with her hands such as pottering in the garden, fixing things or doing embroidery, for example. She claims that these activities are very relaxing, enjoyable and stimulating to her and that they pass the time away pleasantly.

Dianne also finds company in various ways, using the radio and the television so that there is always a voice in her house, and claiming to dislike “total solitary silence” which she finds very morbid. She also relies on her bible, spiritual guide and very good relationship with God to remind her that “Whether there’s anyone around or not, there’s always someone around”. Dianne also had a house mate up until recently, someone with whom she felt that she could be “alone, but not alone”, who assured her that there was always someone around even if they did their own thing. Although this person is now overseas, Dianne still feels that she will always have something to do and that this makes it possible for her to be alone.

In making sense of her world Dianne has also includes various meanings around being alone in her “reality”. She feels that her personality makes it possible for her to be alone, describing herself as a bit shy and an introvert. Both Dianne’s brother and father also spend much time alone, or are “loners”, and

she feels that this is more than just a coincidence and that there is also a genetic element to her ability to be alone. The social discourses of our modern world are also important elements of Dianne's meaning system and she views living alone as socially acceptable nowadays, almost the norm; that society has changed so much since 20 years ago when something would be wrong with one who lived alone. She also feels that it is easier to live alone at her current age whereas older people might become lonely when they "can't keep up" anymore, an idea strongly linked to her reliance on activity to ward off loneliness.

Overall, Dianne appears to have personally experienced the gamut of possibilities from painful loneliness to comfortable aloneness and to find herself mostly in the latter these days. She has shared meanings with those around her for why she lives alone and has developed ways of managing her aloneness and making sense of her time alone as valuable and gratifying. As with other participants, however, she also expresses an ambiguity over whether she would have done her life over this way again and she is able to admit what she would have liked of the typical 'married with children' lifestyles of others. Her story is sad and brave in that she was planning a life of exactly that until circumstances made it impossible, and comfortable aloneness essential, for her life until now.

5.2.5 Victor

Victor is an unmarried, Finnish-born man, who has lived in South Africa since 1986, and spent most of his adult life living alone. He claims to have no problem with being alone and to have decided long ago not to be lonely but to have his "own way of living". Victor keeps himself very busy and is involved in various activities, both participating and organising events, which he finds enjoyable. He presented as an assertive individual who has accepted his ways and made sense of his life alone, even feeling that his position is better than that of others in relationships. He is also a well traveled, cultured and educated man whose life alone has both allowed and required of him to do these things.

Victor started off telling of his nature, or personality, and how it makes aloneness easier for him. He knows himself as someone who never gets depressed, or has "ups and downs", but is rather a very stable person. He acknowledged that he can sometimes be angry, forceful and selfish and it may be that these styles of interaction ensure that he is alone quite often. He does not, however see himself as a difficult person but rather as someone who is straightforward, assertive and independent. Victor expanded on this, saying that he was not a team player and also not "a family person", adding that he

was happy not to have children.

The reasons for this go a long way back, to the lifestyles of others that he had witnessed, and not wanted for himself, and in the lessons that life had taught him. As the second youngest of seven children whose parents both worked, and being much younger than his older sisters, Victor had experienced himself as “more alone”, even at that age. During his school years he had been called upon to look after his older sisters’ children, something he appears to have been quite burdened by, and at the age of 15 he decided that he would not have children of his own. He remembers his siblings marrying and having children at an early age and how they then “could do nothing else”. He had wanted more for himself and recalls his mother encouraging him to “get an education”, so as to be independent, something she had never done for herself.

Victor claims that he did not decide against marriage as such, but rather that he would not marry young and have children straight away. His intention was instead to enjoy his life for himself and he suggested that this attitude of his might be selfish. It can, however, also be understood as reasonable if he had known hardship and limitations in his early life and wanted a better prospect for himself. Victor’s story did include accounts of family and friends who had endured the difficulties of life during war in Finland and how these lessons in life had taught him to be strong and convinced him that he could survive anything that happened to him. A large part of Victor’s meanings around choosing life alone come from the early experiences and stories that made him hardy, self-sufficient and more of a realist than an idealist.

Another strong theme in this interview was Victor’s drive to do something different and other than the typical life of his peers. His plans to move away from his home and home town to study were the start of this, and they introduced him to the “student life” and other young, single and ambitious people. He then described developing a desire to “see the world” and subsequently relocating to a new country and then a new continent. Victor’s impression of those who stayed at home was that they all married and had children soon, and in a sense ‘got stuck’ in a life that he did not want. Having traveled and worked across the world he has now succeeded in achieving the different life that he wanted. He sees himself as someone who has outgrown the cultural identity that linked him to a country of cold and social problems, which had “nothing to give” him, and now feels “more cosmopolitan” and able to “relate to the world”.

Victor recognises and appreciates the benefits that living alone has offered him. He is proud to have studied and to be the highest educated person in his family. He feels that he has been privileged to be able to do exactly what he has wanted and claimed that he has had a full life. He stressed that he does not pity himself or feel that he has missed out on things, ideas which may have been introduced by others responding to his aloneness, and added that, if he had to write a book about his own life, he would say "And it was fun". Victor also feels that he has been able to be more true to himself and what he wants through living alone and gave as an example the fact that he never has to change decisions in an attempt to impress anyone else.

Victor suggested that one reason for his not getting depressions (or experiencing painful loneliness) may be that he keeps himself so occupied. He is actively involved in research at his work; in the riding, judging and training of dressage horses; and the charring and organising of his town house complex's undertakings. He feels that keeping busy allows him to be comfortably alone, and claims to not have known a weekend where he was bored and sat around feeling "I'm lonely, I have nothing to do". Victor has attributed meanings of usefulness to his independence and believes that his traits are necessary for him to partake in competitive dressage and to do well at work. He reasons that, as a researcher, he needs to think for himself, have his own ideas and then do things on his own, without needing anybody's acceptance or approval.

In managing his aloneness Victor also pursues other activities which he understands to relate to how 'cultural' one is. He believes that one's background is very important in as much as it can train one "to be cultural" and to appreciate music, art, film, theater, reading and wine. He maintains that his cultural background taught him these things such that now he always has something to do, and he believes that if people are without such culture they might find life very boring. Victor fills his time alone with much reading, of books and research articles, and always finds that he can learn something from them. His experience of being alone now is one of comfort and enjoyment when he "just read(s) something".

Although he does feel comfortable in his aloneness now, Victor imagines that this may change as he gets older. He suspects that being alone will get more difficult with age because it will be more difficult to make friends, and his needs may have changed by then. As for now Victor said that he does not feel the need for a companion and that he can manage without a relationship with God. He did admit, however, that he was concerned about what would happen to him if he was on his own and got very sick when he was older, and he added that he might then want someone to nurse him, and possibly have

a need for a relationship with God. Victor also feels that male adults have a harder time making friends and that they might feel uncomfortable with each other unless they had grown up together, an assumption which keeps him alone.

For now Victor has his numerous activities to occupy his time and his animals, a cat at home and a horse at the stables. He claims to have more of a working relationship with his horse but some amount of companionship from his cat, adding that “you don’t come home to (a) cold home yourself, there’s a creature”. Earlier on in his life Victor did have a very good friend, someone he felt he could tell anything. Upon learning of this friend’s death he remembers having felt significant “emptiness”, the closest he may have come to feeling painful loneliness. He claims, however, to have never experienced loneliness because he chose to be alone, and he chose not to feel lonely in that. Self governance appears to be a dominant value for Victor and he confirmed this in maintaining that loneliness is caused by a person’s traits.

Overall, Victor has achieved a life which is different in many ways to that of his family members and his peers back in Finland. He also lives a somewhat different life from the average South African ‘person on the street’ in that he lives on his own and has done so for many years. Victor’s response to his aloneness is less common than the experience of loneliness and in that he can also differentiate himself from others. It can be said then that aloneness has allowed him to achieve certain goals in life, in a way it is part of his identity, and that it is still useful for him now although he can see how this might change. He is aware of the greater social acceptance that people who live alone, and go out alone, have these days and he reported that society is changing in this direction. It can be imagined, however, that someone as individualistic as Victor would not wait for society’s permission and he has, in fact, been living quite distinctly for most of his life regardless.

5.3 Dominant themes

In reading through and interpreting the above interviews certain shared themes and dominant points came to light. It is useful to bring together these themes at this point in that they can help to create a picture of certain experiences that those who live alone comfortably might share. To start off with some main ideas that are shared by four, or all five, participants will be highlighted in an attempt to find the essence of each strong motif. Thereafter lesser themes, those which are shared by only two or three of the participants, will also be detailed in terms of the common line that runs through them.

The most prominent theme throughout all of the research participants' stories of their experiences of comfortable aloneness was the idea that they, and presumably anyone, can **come to be alright with aloneness** over time. Amongst the phrases used were that of Sandra's being "conditioned into being alright with aloneness", Gail's idea of the "learned element" in knowing oneself in aloneness and Brother Desmond's having "developed the skills of coping with" being alone. The basis of these assumptions appears to be each participant's sense of having gotten used to aloneness, or having learnt how best to manage it, to the point where they could be comfortable with, or at least accepting of, it.

In fact, many of the participants spoke around how they had **learned to value aloneness** as an important part of their lives. Gail and Dianne simply "enjoy" time alone, and "like being alone" respectively. They both admit that their lifestyles have made it possible for both of them to have "done a lot, seen a lot and been to a lot of places". Victor told of the lessons from life that had taught him to "enjoy the life (him)self", and how he now considers himself "privileged" to live alone. Brother Desmond, on the other hand, has personal and professional "needs for aloneness" in his daily life as "an essential part of (his) spiritual life". Lastly, Sandra "appreciates (her) privacy" and also values her "distancing (as) a way of protecting (her)self" from the possible pain of relationships, while also ensuring her financial security.

Another dominant theme is that of managing aloneness by **keeping oneself busy**, or occupied with various activities, if one is to experience it as comfortable. Gail told of keeping herself "busy" with many things, while Dianne can "just always find something to do" and Brother Desmond, already busy in the church, furthermore strives to "Pray at all times" and stay close to God all day long. Victor spoke of his "activity", and also of how important one's "background" could be in teaching one "culture" which would equip one to keep busy with music, art, film, theater, wine and reading. In a similar vein Sandra told of always having "plenty to do", and of how a "better education" could make one more self-sufficient and better able to occupy one's time with hobbies such as bridge or computers.

From all five stories a clear difference became apparent between having **never planned aloneness** as a lifestyle and currently **choosing to stay alone**. Gail claimed that her living alone "was not a choice, it was just how it turned out" and that she "didn't set out not to get married". Victor also asserted that he had never decided not to marry, only under which conditions he would not marry, but added that he now chooses to be alone. As a personal choice Sandra also prefers to be alone instead of in large gatherings. Dianne chose "to be alone" once her fiancé's death meant that she could not be with him

and she still now claims to “choose to live alone” because she wants to. For quite different reasons Brother Desmond seeks out aloneness and solitude every day in order for him to connect with God. In this way these people can also feel, and do report, a large element of **control over their aloneness**.

From their responses to various questions in the structured interview the participants either confirmed or contradicted theories from the literature around aloneness and loneliness. All participants felt that **maturity**, and having gotten some experience in life, made it easier to cope with being alone. Sandra, Victor and Dianne all described, however, being concerned about living alone when they were very old and were anxious that they might be friendless, sickly or unable “to keep up” anymore. Most of the participants answered that they viewed their **own gender** as better able to manage aloneness, with the exception of Victor who answered conversely.

In response to the question on the influence of **family and early experience** most answers backed the idea that early family life had either encouraged independence or created a circumstance in which aloneness had to be managed from an early age. For instance, Sandra learnt from role models that living alone was possible and sometimes preferable, while Victor responded in reaction to his impression of the limitations of family life. Brother Desmond, Dianne and Victor backed the idea that a person’s response of loneliness is trait and not state based, that it is “an internal thing”. Both Sandra and Gail, however, felt that loneliness depends on both trait and state factors. The participants’ strong reliance on trait, or character, factors in deciding their response to aloneness, nonetheless, confirms their sense of being in control of their aloneness and shows them up as a group to rely more on an **internal locus of control**.

Despite this ability to manage aloneness, and often choose it for various reasons in their lives, most of the participants **have also known loneliness** at some time. Brother Desmond has had “times of loneliness” during his life in the church. Gail, Sandra and Dianne claimed to have known loneliness as children while Sandra was also lonely during her marriage and Dianne was lonely at times due to her work. Victor is the only one to have stated that he has “never had loneliness”, and the closest thing to this that he described was a pervasive sense of “emptiness” that he had felt at the death of his best friend.

Having known loneliness at times, most of the participants told of ways that they had found to manage being alone without feeling lonely. Besides being active and keeping busy after hours, the **importance**

of their work was also a common theme to come out of the unstructured interview as well as the structured interview. Victor described being very active in his work and being stimulated by what he does, and Gail works “in a place with lots of contact with people” which then makes it possible for her to be alone after work. Sandra’s work is important in ensuring the financial security of her aloneness and in providing her with some company, while Brother Desmond finds that his work as a priest helps him with “managing, making sense of, giving meaning to and choosing to use time alone in (his) life”. In the structured questionnaire most participants also responded that their specific occupations require of them to be able to handle aloneness and/or make it possible for them to be alone. The author’s personal assumption that psychologists also need to be able to work alone was not directly addressed or alluded to at any point.

The **benefits of religion** for aloneness are, furthermore, shared by Brother Desmond (obviously), Gail and Dianne who all claim to find a sense of relatedness or company in the bible, a spiritual guide or God. Victor and Sandra, however, differ with this and contend that they do not have a relationship with God or a need for such a relationship in managing their aloneness. Such a need, or lack of a need, for certain types of relatedness can be tied in with Sadler’s (Ferns, 1988) five dimensions of loneliness, namely psychological, interpersonal, social, cultural and cosmic loneliness. Here one would expect to find that Victor and Sandra do not define the absence of a relationship with God as a form of loneliness. In the structured interview most of the respondents agreed that they had such different relatedness needs, which could lead to different dimensions of loneliness if unsatisfied, and that some dimensions of relatedness could compensate for the lack of others.

Other secondary themes, which were found less often, are still notable in that they were shared strongly by two or more participants. Victor, Sandra and Gail mentioned the importance of **independence** and how it was a part of their nature and/or necessary for them to live alone comfortably. A strong sensitivity to the **individuality** of all people was evident in the accounts of both Brother Desmond and Gail and this may have been cultured during their times alone. Brother Desmond and Sandra were both clear about the differences between **deep relationships** and superficial ones and how these might either prevent or promote loneliness respectively. Dianne, Sandra and Gail expressed a similar **ambivalence** towards their lived experience of aloneness and the thought of whether they would do their lives over the same way. Both Sandra and Gail had been involved in **volunteer work** and had achieved a sense of belonging and of contributing to society through this. Furthermore, both Brother Desmond and Dianne felt that having company without **communication** could be as bad as solitary loneliness, and

they seem to view good communication as that element which makes the difference.

Overall these participants, who are either comfortable with their aloneness or able to acknowledge its purposes in their lives, are mature and introspective individuals who have doubtless spent much of their time alone in becoming self-aware. They have pondered and questioned their life alone until they found satisfactory answers, or reached a point of no longer needing to answer the questions. All have felt the pressure from society to conform and live with others and have had to make sense of their aloneness not only for themselves but for others as well. The author has a sense that these interviews served as a welcome forum for the participants to re-examine their experiences and meanings around aloneness, and consolidate their understandings and descriptions that may have gone unheard or misunderstood by others until now.

5.4 Comparing descriptions of aloneness with loneliness

In this section the actual comparison between the descriptions of painful loneliness and comfortable aloneness will be done. Each participant's description of their lived experience of, and meanings around, comfortable aloneness will be set out. Their comfortable aloneness will be the point of focus despite the fact that they may have also reported having felt loneliness in the past or the present. In fact, these participants do represent a wide band of responses to aloneness, from Sandra's belief that living alone causes so much of "the sickness of the world today" to Dianne's conviction that it is "so great to be alone, there's so much to do". These descriptions will then be compared to the experiences of painful loneliness as described in chapter two, which will be revisited and summarised for these purposes.

5.4.1 Descriptions of comfortable aloneness

Sandra's experience of aloneness does appear to be less 'comfortable' and she confirmed that she has reached more of an acceptance of her aloneness than a comfort with it. She does, however, often talk of how she appreciates her privacy, wants to have time to herself, and prefers to be alone and she can acknowledge the contradictions apparent between her beliefs and actual needs around aloneness. Sandra also values her aloneness in that she relies on it to protect and support her in various ways. Sandra's score on the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) was also the highest, suggesting that she responded as being more lonely than the others on this test, and this ties in with her ambivalence

around aloneness.

Victor describes his experience of being alone as easy for him, something that he is still comfortable with and that allows him to enjoy his pastimes. He appears to feel busy and occupied with things that interest him when he is alone and reports that he does never “has depressions” and is stable emotionally. Victor feels the opposite of self-pity, and having missed out on things, with regards to his life alone and instead feels that he is privileged and proud to have lived alone and done so much. He describes his life alone as a “full” one and would say that his life had been “fun”. Victor’s UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) score suggests that he responded more towards the lonely side than the last three participants.

Brother Desmond had professional as well as personal needs and meanings around his experience of aloneness as a priest. He describes his experience of being alone as very comfortable for “95 % of the time” and uncomfortable for the rest. His main feelings and associations with comfortable aloneness are “a sense of great contentment, consolation, a sense of peacefulness, (...) a feeling of warmth, a sense of being comfortable, self acceptance”. This description ties in well with the spiritual meanings of solitude that contribute to his experience of aloneness. His UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) score is average of all participants and confirms his reports that he does feel comfortable aloneness and uncomfortable loneliness and that he needs both relatedness with others and time alone.

Dianne claims that aloneness is not a problem for her, that she keeps herself busy and has many interests which she finds enjoyable and relaxing. She described her experience of being comfortably alone as feeling at peace, without hassles and relaxed so that she can just sit and think, and analyse the day’s events. Dianne feels strongly that her aloneness is her choice, and she does not experience it as mindless boredom but rather as meaningful and stimulating time during which she can get her thoughts together and do her own thing. Her UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) score is closer to representing a feeling of less loneliness than with the above participants and this confirms her reported comfort with her aloneness.

Gail’s experience of time alone is one that she describes as enjoyable, a time during which she can switch off and do her own things. Her descriptions of her experience of comfortable aloneness include the feelings of peaceful and the freedom to do things without having to consider others. She reports relishing the prospect of a whole day at home alone, and feels that she can manage aloneness by

keeping herself busy and doing different and new things. Gail described a sense of ownership of her life and aloneness and reported positive experiences of coping when alone, so that she does not feel negative or guilty over it. Her UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) score was the lowest of all the participants and suggests that she experiences least amount of loneliness, which is reflected in her positive approach to being alone.

The above participants have described aloneness as something that they are mostly comfortable with, neutral towards or accepting of. They find their aloneness generally easy to live with and can even enjoy this time if they can keep themselves busy and occupied with work and interests. Their lived experiences of aloneness include feelings of contentment, consolation, peacefulness, and appreciation, and many insist that they choose to be alone nowadays and relish a weekend all to themselves. Many feel that they have been privileged to live alone as this has made so many things possible for them. They describe their lives as full and not at all lacking in good or pleasant things. Their time alone can be fun, stimulating or even meaningful and they have used it for anything from spiritual closeness with God to simple relaxation.

5.4.2 Descriptions of painful loneliness

The descriptions of loneliness, as given in chapter two, clearly portray a sense of painful feelings and experiences. Both the quantitative studies on loneliness and qualitative descriptions of the experience confirm that it is a painful state. From the quantitative point of view, Rokach and Brock's (1997) structure of loneliness contains, amongst others, the primary factors of Emotional distress, Social inadequacy and Interpersonal alienation, surely negative experiences. Joiner et al. (1999) also talk of their dimensions of loneliness under the names of Painful disconnection and Lack of pleasurable engagement, similarly unpleasant experiences.

The effects of loneliness are connected with stress and poor health and carry an overall negative prognosis for an individual's well-being (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1974). The same authors also report the negative effects of loneliness on one's mental state, such as feelings of worthlessness, constant worry, anxiety, irrational fears, trouble concentrating, feeling irritable, guilty and angry, having crying spells, tiredness and feeling that one just can not go on. Murphy and Kupshik (1992) concur that loneliness is positively correlated with depression and anxiety.

From a qualitative point of view Rouner (1998) describes the experience of loneliness as the agony of the lonely soul and characterises it as a feeling of dynamic, driving restlessness. Gaev (1976) contends that most people consciously fear loneliness because of its ability to make us feel emotionally uncomfortable. She adds that loneliness can be accompanied by a vague and pervasive anxiety which makes one feel panicked and helpless, not knowing how to cope and fearing that it may overwhelm one. Weiss's (1973) emotional isolation is described as a sense of utter aloneness and a pervasive apprehension, feeling empty, dead and hollow within, and barren and desolate without. His social isolation is characterised by feelings of aimlessness, marginality, boredom, restlessness and the drive to find a group or activities.

Rubenstein and Shaver (1974) portray loneliness at the highest end of its continuum as a most disturbing sense of desperation in which one feels helpless, panicked, abandoned, without hope, vulnerable and afraid. Buchholz and Catton (1999) describe loneliness as a negative state most often coupled with feelings of sadness and hopelessness. Suedfeld (1982) and Tillich (in Hritzuk, 1982) surmise that loneliness can hurt; that there is pain in being alone. Loneliness, then, sounds like an unpleasant state of emotional pain and negative self-image that people fear, try to avoid and yet struggle to escape from. Lonely people seem to feel unable to help themselves in the face of their circumstances, and hopeless about whether things will ever improve. This picture is one of difficulties, suffering, fear and desperation and should be understood to refer to those who truly feel painfully lonely.

5.4.3 Comparing these descriptions

In commenting on their experience of being alone the research participants of this study claimed that they felt mostly comfortable and relaxed with it. They said that it was easy for them to be alone, and really not a problem in their lives. The experience of loneliness is very different to this in that lonely people report instead a difficult time of feeling various emotional distresses or discomforts such as depression, psychic hurt and pain. The 'agony of the lonely soul' includes numerous other negative effects on one's mental state as well, from a pervasive apprehension up to constant worry, anxiety, and even irrational fears.

Those who are comfortable when alone can speak of their alone time mostly in positive terms, as something that they enjoy and even relish at times. The predominant feelings that accompany their aloneness are a sense of peacefulness, of great contentment, and of consolation, and a feeling of

warmth, freedom, and of being free of hassles. For the lonely, however, their sense of being alone is one related to myriad negative associations such as feeling sad, irritable, guilty and even angry.

The life of the comfortably alone is also different in that these people report feeling busy and occupied almost the whole time. They describe their way of existence as a full and meaningful life, which makes so many things possible for them and can always include their own brand of fun. These people may have a dominant need for relatedness with themselves, something which solitary pastimes can allow them to enjoy and explore. Those who experience painful loneliness, however, are characterised by a sense of boredom, aimlessness, tiredness, and trouble concentrating at best, up to a dynamic and driving restlessness at worst. They describe their existence as including empty, dead and hollow inner lives, and barren and desolate outer lives.

The experience of either comfortable aloneness or painful loneliness can also affect the way that people view themselves. The comfortably alone tend to see themselves as competent, independent, and emotionally stable people who have accepted themselves and have a sense of ownership over their lives and their aloneness. It may be that these people have an internal locus of control which makes it possible for them to view aloneness as their own creation, or at least feel that they control what they make of it. They often feel privileged and proud to have shaped their lives as they have, they value the time spent with themselves and generally emerge from this time feeling energised, stimulated and alive. The lonely, however, are often troubled by feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness, hopelessness, vulnerability and fear. They report not knowing how to cope and often feeling that they just can not go on. Their sense of alienation, marginality, and abandonment can have them reacting with the seldom successful responses of denial or a desperate drive to find a group or activities.

People who are comfortable being alone tend to value this time, and report having reached a stage of accepting it as an important, needed and even essential part of their lives. They choose to use their alone time variously as spiritual solitude, time to just switch off and do their own thing, or to make sense of their world. They appear to have attached the meanings and values of usefulness to aloneness, such that it then becomes an acceptable state to them. The lonely view time spent alone as more of a danger in that it often feels as if it might overwhelm them and take over. Whereas the comfortably alone generally view themselves as able to make changes in their lives, the most disturbing sense of desperation that the painfully lonely often feel can leave them feeling panicked and helpless, and very unlikely to attempt a turn around of their situation.

5.5 Conclusion

It appears that the descriptions of the lived experiences of comfortable aloneness and painful loneliness do differ greatly and that they represent two very disparate states of being for the people in either of them. The two states differ in terms of the affective responses that they inspire in people and the way that people think about and make sense of either. The effects of the two states are also opposing in terms of how they impact on the person's view of themselves, their personal ability to have effect on their lives and their outlook on the future. The author also expects that the lasting effects, if any, of discussing with people their lived experiences of time spent alone, would be more negative for those who are painfully lonely and more positive for those who are comfortably alone.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Realisation of research goals

In reflecting on the original aims of this study it can be seen that it has done that which it set out to do. The primary goal or question of this study was to compare the different descriptions that comfortably alone and painfully lonely people would give of their lived experience of either state. To do so the author has, on the one hand, participated in interviews with comfortably alone individuals in which they richly described their lived experience of aloneness, and told of their meanings and realities around it. The analysis and interpretation of this data was informed by the heuristic and phenomenological research methods and the author worked towards distilling the essences of each participant's story of their aloneness and its history.

Much overlap or similarity was found between the dominant themes of each person's experience and these were then highlighted as shared themes which can help to portray the general experience of being alone for those who are comfortably so. It is these shared themes that can be contrasted with the shared themes of the experience of painful loneliness in an attempt to describe and understand how it is that some people experience the one or the other in response to similar circumstance of relative isolation from others.

On the other hand, the author went back to the ample literature on loneliness to search for and summarise the essences of the lived experience of painful loneliness for others. Literature sources were used for this part of the study because of ethical considerations of doing no harm to research participants. It was feared that painfully lonely participants might experience the in-depth and exploratory interviews that were planned around their loneliness as pathological if this were to be their main experience of their collaboration in the study, as no therapy was planned for thereafter.

The above methodology did produce rich, varied and interesting descriptions of the two lived experiences of time spent alone, as well as indications of many attributes and thought patterns of either group of people. Loneliness was generally experienced as uncomfortable, painful and feared whereas simple aloneness was generally experienced as comfortable and/or neutral, useful and desirable. The comfortably alone participants' responses frequently confirmed the literature in terms, especially, of

their keeping themselves occupied with many activities, becoming very committed to their work, doing extra volunteer work and learning to appreciate solitude (Levete, 1993).

The author furthermore was able to interpret that the comfortably alone also: change their social needs and/or perceived importance of any relational deficits, and select tasks and activities that are usually done alone (Peplau & Perlman, 1982), understand their aloneness and its origin, have developed a more positive inner life and sometimes practice a religion (Pothoff, 1976), have higher self-concepts and an internal locus of control (Ferns, 1988), have learnt new social rules, are maintaining and deepening existing relationships and manage the thoughts that might promote loneliness (Murphy & Kupshik, 1992) and view occasional loneliness as “in the situation” and temporary, and therefore changeable (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1974).

6.2 Shortcomings of this study

As an in-depth, descriptive and qualitative study this research has been limited to only five participants due to time constraints, the scope of this dissertation and in order to produce rich descriptions of each person's experiences as opposed to descriptive statistics of a ‘large representative sample’. As such the interpretations of this study are more dependable than reliable, more credible than valid and more transferable than generalisable (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999). Interpretations must be understood as being detailed and subjective illustrations of individuals' experiences, which can serve as frameworks for understanding the meanings of other studies and new contexts. They do not however, conclusively prove any hypotheses or represent widely generalisable findings for similar populations.

This study is also limited in terms of its participant sample. As has been mentioned in Chapter 4, purposeful (i.e. non-random) sampling was done to select a few information-rich research participants who qualified as extreme cases (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999), that is as people who were relatively more alone than the ‘average man or woman on the street’ in that they lived alone and had done so for many years. Such participants were difficult to find and it must be remembered that the author's subjective choices and biases could have played in here in terms of selecting certain people and not others.

The sample is, furthermore, not heterogenous and the shared characteristics of certain participants must be kept in mind in that they will surely influence a proportion of the themes that were found to be

shared by participants. The participants were well spread in terms of age across adulthood (from a 27 year old to a 57 year old), and in terms of gender (there were three women and two men). The sample was not well spread, however, in terms of education (all five participants had tertiary education), by location (all were residents of cities in the same province) and race and nationality (all participants were so-called white South Africans by birth or naturalisation).

6.3 Recommendations for future research

Future research on this or a similar topic could aim to eliminate the shortcomings of this study in terms of its specific participant sample. It would be very interesting and possibly relevant to investigate the same question for people of different races and cultures in order to investigate whether these or some of these interpretations are shared by other groups as well or if they come up with greatly different lived experiences of time spent alone.

It would be useful to have similar questions asked and investigated from a quantitative point of view so as to contribute more generalisable findings to this problem. The author would also be interested to see whether psychologists from different epistemologies and schools of thought would be interested in furthering this research and what interpretations they would reach.

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APPENDIX A THE UCLA LONELINESS SCALE (VERSION 3)

Instructions: the following statements describe how people sometimes feel. For each statement, please indicate how often you feel the way described by *circling* one number. Here is an example:

How often do you feel happy?

If you never felt happy, you would respond “never”; if you always felt happy, you would respond “always”.

	<u>Never</u>	<u>Rarely</u>	<u>Sometimes</u>	<u>Always</u>
1. How often do you feel that you are “in tune” with the people around you?	1	2	3	4
2. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?	1	2	3	4
3. How often do you feel that there is no one you can turn to?	1	2	3	4
4. How often do you feel alone?	1	2	3	4
5. How often do you feel part of a group of friends?	1	2	3	4
6. How often do you feel that you have a lot in common with the people around you?	1	2	3	4

	<u>Never</u>	<u>Rarely</u>	<u>Sometimes</u>	<u>Always</u>
7. How often do you feel that you are no longer close to anyone?	1	2	3	4
8. How often do you feel that your interests and ideas are not shared by those around you?	1	2	3	4
9. How often do you feel outgoing and friendly?	1	2	3	4
10. How often do you feel close to people?	1	2	3	4
11. How often do you feel left out?	1	2	3	4
12. How often do you feel that your relationships with others are not meaningful?	1	2	3	4
13. How often do you feel that no one really knows you well?	1	2	3	4
14. How often do you feel isolated from others?	1	2	3	4
15. How often do you feel that you can find companionship when you want it?	1	2	3	4
16. How often do you feel that there are people who really understand you?	1	2	3	4
17. How often do you feel shy?	1	2	3	4

	<u>Never</u>	<u>Rarely</u>	<u>Sometimes</u>	<u>Always</u>
18. How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you?	1	2	3	4
19. How often do you feel that there are people you can talk to?	1	2	3	4
20. How often do you feel that there are people you can turn to?	1	2	3	4

Scoring:

Items 1, 5, 6, 9, 10, 15, 16, 19 and 20 should be reversed (i.e., 1 = 4, 2 = 3, 3 = 2, 4 = 1), and the scores for each item then summed together. Higher scores indicate greater degrees of loneliness.

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APPENDIX B

STRUCTURED QUESTIONNAIRE

Would you say that you live relatively more alone, or more isolated from other people, than your idea of the "average man/woman on the street"?

And would you say that your experience of this aloneness is mostly comfortable or even neutral?

What is your age?

Would you say that your age contributes in any way to your being able to manage aloneness?

Do you think that being a man/woman helps you to be comfortably alone?

How would you describe the cultural group that you belong to?

Do you think that your culture allows you to be alright in aloneness?

How would you describe your profession, job, training or education?

Do you think that it contributes to how well you can manage time alone?

Were your family in any way formative or supporting of this ability?

Do you have memories of getting experience at being alone from your childhood?

There is a theory in psychology that views loneliness as stemming from state (circumstances around one) or trait (characteristics within one) origins. What do you think of this assumptions?

Another theory from psychology suggests that there is more than one kind of loneliness, based on different needs for relatedness. One might experience loneliness from the self, from an intimate relationship, from the physical proximity of others, from a cultural identity and from a spiritual connection. Can you see how this could make sense?

Please describe in detail what it is like for you to be alone comfortably?

How do you envision yourself in the future with aloneness?

Is there anything else that you would like to add, anything about what it was like to think around and discuss your experience of being alone?