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Research Article

Loneliness as a Biographical Disruption—Theoretical Implications for Understanding Changes in Loneliness

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Abstract

Objectives: While a great deal is known about the risk factors that increase vulnerability to loneliness in later life, little research has explored stability and change in levels of loneliness.
Methods: Narrative interviews were conducted with 11 participants who were identified as being lonely during Wave 1 of the Maintaining Function and Well-being in Later Life Study Wales (CFAS Wales). The interviews were used to explore stability and change in levels of loneliness from the perspective of older people themselves. The interviews focused on participant's perspectives of the events that triggered loneliness, stability, and change in levels of loneliness over time as well as participant's responses to loneliness.
Results: The findings show that participants experienced losses and loneliness as biographical disruption. How participants and their wider social network responded to these losses had implications for the individual's trajectory through loneliness.
Discussion: Drawing on a biographical lens, the study reframed the events that triggered loneliness as disruptive events. This article discusses the utility of biographical disruption in understanding stability and change in loneliness. The findings suggest how drawing on valued identities may help lonely adults transition out of loneliness.

Keywords: Biography, Identity, Loneliness, Narrative, Transitions

Globally, between 25% and 62% of older adults report being lonely at least some of the time (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2020). In the United Kingdom, between 10% and 25% of older adults are affected by loneliness (Beaumont, 2013; Burholt et al., 2016), with approximately 11% being chronically lonely.

In this article, we define loneliness as the negative emotional response to a discrepancy between the desired and achieved quantity and quality of relationships (De Jong Gierveld, 1998). Thus, loneliness is the result of a subjective appraisal of social relationships.

Much of the early work on loneliness was rooted in the positivist tradition, which viewed loneliness as an objective state that could be observed, measured, and quantified. This resulted in measures of loneliness that attempted to quantify loneliness using proxies such as network density, network function, social deficits and unmet social needs, and the number and frequency of social contact. This research was based on an underlying assumption that loneliness varies in intensity rather than a difference in the nature of the experience (Victor et al., 2009). As such a great deal is known about the prevalence of loneliness and the risk factors associated with it in later life (for a review of the literature, see the study of Victor et al., 2005); however, less attention has been paid to the duration of these states. This oversight is important as loneliness can fluctuate

over time and outcomes may differ for different loneliness states. Occasional periods of loneliness are normal and generally resolves on its own with no long-term consequences (DiTomasso et al., 2015). Chronic loneliness, on the other hand, has been found to have serious implications for physical and mental health. These include increases in systolic blood pressure, a reduction in self-regulation of behavior, increased risk of mortality, and declines in cognition (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Shiovitz-Ezra & Ayalon, 2010; Zhong et al., 2016).

Much of the current knowledge on loneliness has been gleaned from cross-sectional empirical studies that treat loneliness as a state at a single point in time (Alpass & Neville, 2003).

Longitudinal cohort studies define loneliness as situational or transient if the state occurs only at one wave of data collection and chronic if stable over more than one wave (Jylha, 2004; Shiovitz-Ezra & Ayalon, 2010). Waves of longitudinal data are often collected several years apart. Consequently, the empirical mapping of the trajectory of loneliness may fail to account for fluctuations between waves.

Without relying on such assumptions, this research draws on the lived experiences of lonely older adults living in Wales, United Kingdom. This article explores the potential of the concept of biographical disruption (Bury, 1982) to help understand transitions into (and out of) loneliness. Biographical disruption has been used as an explanatory device to comprehend how people respond and adapt to chronic illness for many years. Yet to date, no study has used it to elucidate responses to loneliness, and why, some individuals recover from loneliness while others become chronically lonely.

Theoretical Framework: Biographical Disruption and Identity

In his work on chronic illness, Bury (1982) described serious illness as "the kind of experience where the structures of everyday life and the forms of knowledge which underpin them are disrupted" (p. 169). He described three dimensions of biographical disruption. First, illness unsettles the body, social roles, and the social world through "the disruption of taken-for-granted assumptions and behaviours" (Bury, 1982). Second, chronic illness disrupts self-identity to such an extent that a fundamental rethinking of the individual's biography and their self-concepts is involved (Charmaz, 1983, 1994, 1995, 2002). Third, the way in which individuals respond to disruption involves "the mobilisation of resources in facing an altered situation" (Bury, 1982, p. 169). Thus, chronically ill people may attempt to restore or repair the loss of self-identity (Charmaz, 1994, 1995) through the mobilization of cognitive processes such as tolerance and normalization in order to maintain meaning in life (Bury, 1991).

Even though biographical disruption has not been explicit in research on loneliness in later life, the concept resonates with many research findings. By taking each of the dimensions of biographical disruption described by Bury (1982, 1991), in turn, research can be reinterpreted to suggest that this may be a useful concept.

Disruption of Taken for Granted Assumptions and Behaviors

A range of life events and transitions can lead to significant changes in the structure and function of the social networks of older adults (Perlman & Peplau, 1981; Terhell et al., 2004; Zettel & Rook, 2004). Bereavement (Aartsen & Jylhä, 2011; Utz et al., 2014), retirement (Bolton, 2012), migration (Wenger et al., 1996), relocation into a care home (Golden, 2009), or the breakdown of a marriage in later life (Liu & Rook, 2013) can disrupt or fracture social relations increasing the risk of experiencing loneliness with age. Poor health and functional limitations also negatively affect relationship quality, diminishing social contact (De Jong Gierveld et al., 2006). As such, the events and transitions that trigger changes in social networks, resulting in loneliness as a "critical situation" (Giddens, 1979) or disruptive event in the individual's life course.

Rethinking Biography and Self-Identity

The events that trigger loneliness disrupt the structure of everyday life. These events can radically disturb the life course, leaving people searching for personal meaning in order to make sense of changed circumstances. The search for meaning, in response to loss, resonates with proponents of existential loneliness, who believe that loneliness is an inevitable human condition (Mijuskovic, 1977; Moustakas, 1961). Existentialist scholars believe that loneliness is a chance to reflect, to ask why, and to find meaning in despair (Heidegger, 2007; Sartre, 1967).

Similarly, the events that trigger loneliness can dislocate an individual's sense of self, their assumptions about the world, and their relationships as well as unsettling their plans, resulting in questions such as, "what has happened to me?" "who have I become?" and "why?" (Cardano, 2010). Consequently, the events that precipitate loneliness may force an older person to make sense of their changed circumstances and reconstruct a biography, which reflects their past, present, and future.

Coping: Mobilization of Resources to Repair or Restore Identity

Humans are natural storytellers (Kenyon & Randall, 1999), they weave stories to maintain a sense of identity, drawing on their lived events and experiences (Radley,

1994; Randall, 2011; Williams, 1984). From a narrative gerontological standpoint, stories give an inside account of the lived experience of later life (Kenyon & Randall, 1999) and loneliness. Narrative accounts of loneliness draw on cognitive processes such as self-evaluation to give the concept personal meaning (Perlman & Peplau, 1998). Indeed, Peplau et al. (1982, p. 140) argue that discovering why one is lonely is the first step toward alleviating loneliness. How an individual makes sense of their loneliness and the meanings they attach to it can "influence the feelings and behaviours that accompany the experience" (Peplau et al., 1982, p. 140). It also influences the coping strategies they employ (for review of coping strategies and loneliness, see the study of Deckx et al., 2018). This assertion is supported by Schoenmakers et al. (2015) who note that coping styles differ depending on whether the individual perceives loneliness to be modifiable or not.

Potential Strengths and Weaknesses of a Biographical Disruption Approach

The reinterpretation of research findings above gives credence to the utility of biographical disruption as a lens through which to view loneliness. However, previous research has not explicitly used this approach as a framework to organize data. In the context of poor health or chronic disease, some authors have argued that the concept of biographical disruption may not apply to people who experience multiple comorbidities. Instead, another illness is not so much disruptive, but part of "biographical flow" (Faircloth et al., 2004).

Furthermore, drawing on the health literature, it has been suggested that people who have faced adversity throughout their lives may anticipate ill-health in old age. As such it is not experienced as a disruptive force when compared to the experiences of people who do not expect chronic illness (Faircloth et al., 2004; Hopkins, 2004; Leveälahti et al., 2007; Pound et al., 1998; Richardson et al., 2006). Similarly, older people who have faced loneliness or disadvantage and exclusion from social relations throughout their lives may anticipate loneliness in later life and as such do not experience these states as profound biographical disruptions but of continuity and normality.

The application of a biographical lens to facilitate understandings of transitions in loneliness is novel. This article aims to show how the application of a biographical lens can facilitate a greater understanding of the loneliness trajectory for chronically lonely older people and explain why some people recover from loneliness while others become chronically lonely. This article also aims to examine whether there are examples of "biographical flow" or disadvantage that suggest that the loneliness state is not viewed as disruptive. This is important theoretical work, as increased knowledge about the trajectories of loneliness may elucidate information on the most promising form of interventions, that is, will specific groups of older people benefit from specific types of help at particular junctures in order for them to overcome loneliness.

Method

This article reports on the qualitative strand of a mixed-method study exploring the transient nature of loneliness in later life.

Recruitment and Sampling

Participants for the qualitative study were drawn from Wave 1 of the longitudinal cohort study Maintaining Function and Well-being in Later Life Study Wales (CFAS Wales; for sampling information, see the study of Burholt & Sardani, 2018). The qualitative strand of the research used a purposive sampling frame to select participants ($n = 20$) from a prerelease interim data set from Wave 1 CFAS Wales study. At the time the sample was drawn, 2,308 older adults had completed interviews. Participants who had responded they were sometimes or always lonely in the main CFAS Wales study were eligible for inclusion. The inclusion and exclusion criteria (summarized in Table 1) were sent to the team at Cambridge University who used SPSS to randomly select lonely individuals in the two study areas.

A decision was made to use a small sample in line with recommendations by Creswell (1998) and Morse (1994), to enable a detailed case by case analysis of each transcript. To reflect differences in experiences, participants were drawn from both study areas (five from North Wales and five from South Wales), with a further sample of 10 being drawn a few weeks later.

Potential participants were sent an invitation letter, and an information sheet by post followed a week later by a telephone call. Of the 20 participants selected, 11 agreed to be interviewed, 5 men and 6 women. The remaining 9 participants were either unwilling or unable to participate, could not be located, had died, or were too confused to be interviewed. The demographic details of the participants are detailed in Table 2. Ethical approval and permission to conduct the study within the Betsi Cadwaladr and Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Boards were granted by the North Wales Research Ethics Committee and the All Wales Primary Care Research Management and Governance Office.

Table 1. Sample Selection Criteria

Inclusion criteria	Sometimes or always lonely
	Community-dwelling/residential or nursing home/sheltered housing
	Quantitative interview conducted in English
Exclusion criteria	Resided in long-stay hospital
	Quantitative interview conducted in Welsh

Table 2. Sample Characteristics

Participant name	Age, years	Marital status	Living with	Health status	Loneliness trajectory
John	72	Divorced	Lives alone	Reduced mobility/poor health	Degenerating
Tom	84	Widowed	Lives alone	Cognitive impairment	Stable
Brian	78	Separated	Lives alone	None	Decreased
Val	67	Widowed	Lives alone	Visual impairment	Degenerating
Pat	73	Widowed	Lives alone	None	Decreased
Dot	68	Widowed	Lives with adult child	Recovered cancer	Decreased
Jane	68	Widowed	Lives alone	Visual impairment	Stable
Ivor	74	Divorced	Lives alone	Stroke recovered	Decreased
Ray	72	Divorced	Lives alone	Stroke/cancer recovered	Stable
Kate	78	Widowed	Lives alone	Fibromyalgia	Stable
Jean	84	Widowed	Lives with adult child	Severe arthritis	Decreased

Interview Data

Narrative interviews were conducted by the first author, in participant's homes between February and April 2013. Narrative interviews enabled participants to express their loneliness in their own way. It was, for this reason, a topic guide consisting of open-ended questions was used as an aide-memoire to guide questions in several key areas. Participants were invited to talk about changes that had occurred in their social relationships as they had aged, their experience of loneliness, how levels of loneliness had changed over time, and how they coped with loneliness.

Interviews were audio-recorded and took on average 75 min; two interviews were cut short after approximately 40 min, one due to an unexpected visitor and another due to the participant's distress. Handwritten notes were taken during the interview to record the participant's mood and any questions or issues raised by the participant, which needed to be explored. After each interview, interview notes were expanded, and verbatim transcripts were produced. The data were collected by the first author, a mixed-method researcher, with significant experience in qualitative data collection and analysis.

Data Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009) was employed to analyze the data. NVivo 10 (QSR International, 2012) was used to assist the analysis and manage the data.

Following the process outlined by Smith et al. (2009), transcripts were coded using a combination of deductive theory-driven, inductive, data-driven, and in vivo codes. Deductive codes drew on three main themes derived from the existing literature: later life events, health concerns, and network change.

Data-driven, inductive codes emerging from the data included loss of self, changing expectations, mobilizing of support, and fractured relationships. Some emergent inductive themes resonated with Bury's description of biographical disruption, as such the transcripts were reexamined through a biographical lens. Elements of biographical disruption, biographical flow, and continuity were evident in the transcripts (Table 3).

At the time of the qualitative data collection, up to 2 years had passed since the initial CFAS Wales interview. Participants were asked about changes in levels of loneliness, those reporting being less lonely than a year ago were identified as decreased, those reporting no change as stable, and those reporting loneliness worsening as degenerating. Developing a visual representation of the themes for each participant, patterns and connections between emergent themes were examined. This process found evidence of biographical flow and continuity associated with a transition out of loneliness, while ongoing disruption was associated with stable and degenerating loneliness.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, a second independent researcher, experienced in qualitative data analysis, analyzed and coded half of the transcripts. Any lack of consensus on assigned codes resulted in them being reexamined and an agreement reached. The codes were discussed with the second author, who has two decades of experience in qualitative and quantitative analysis, to ensure validity. The results presented are based on this iterative process.

Results

Understanding Loneliness as a Disruptive Event

The transition into loneliness was experienced as a disruptive event(s) for all the older adults in the study. For some, loneliness was triggered by a single life event (bereavement, marital breakdown, relocation, or the onset of disability), whereas for others loneliness was an outcome of a series of events (e.g., retirement resulting from poor health, leading to the loss of a driving license).

The Disruption of Taken-for-Granted Assumptions and Behaviors

The events and changes that can trigger a transition into loneliness can also bring significant changes to the structure

Table 3. Themes, Subthemes, and Extracts

Theme	Subtheme	Code	Extract	Participant
Identity	Loss of self	Loss of responsibility	I was nursing for 38 years, you know, and I was in charge, I was in charge of people wasn't I and now for people to tell me.	Val
		Loss of identity	[Being married], that's all I'd ever known. I remember thinking about a week later, coming down the stairs, I thought, and I took my wedding ring off, and I thought "I'm not married anymore."	Dot
Rethinking life	Life lived/life now	Rethinking of whole life	It came as such a shock when she did leave that I just had to re-think my whole life and as I say I'm just beginning to get it back together again, erm, so you have to find ways of coping with it, forcing yourself to make contact with other people.	Brian
		Regrets	Maybe it was a mistake; if I'd known that she was going to clear off we wouldn't have moved here because we're at the end ... all my family are about 240 miles away, so you know it's a long way to go.	Brian
Fractured relationships	Loss of anticipated support	Family don't care	Like you can imagine sitting here not seeing anybody, and your granddaughter passes you, and she's 23, 24 and she's pushing the grandkids down the bloody thing straight passed you, and it fell to my ex-wife, she has told her that what the hell is she doing walking straight past and don't come here and everything, "oh I haven't got time, oh I've got this, I've got three kids to look after and everything else."	John
		She only comes for money	<daughter 2> I don't see her from one day to the next unless she wants money, as soon as she wants to borrow and then I see her then. As soon as I see her I know she's come for money "oh you don't come to see me, it's all you want is money."	John
Mobilizing support	Friendships as support	Support of friends to socialize	We used to go out for a meal, so they still come and collect me for that, and they still come down on the Saturday, stay in the house with me, and I have another friend that comes every other Wednesday, and this is since my husband have died so that they've, you know, they've just supported me, and I have another set of friends that come at weekends now and again.	Val
		Always got each other	We all look after one another, and we're continually, I mean the phone rang this morning, and I don't have to wait for anybody to find out who I am or anything, you know, we are always with one another like you know.	Pat
	Family as support	Close and supportive	I'm close to my family, although they've got lives of their own, you know, I've got one neighbor that phones me twice a week, and he comes up when he can, he does shift work, he was here Saturday, and my niece was here yesterday you know, it's that and the phone, my niece she phones me, or I phone her every day, you know.	Kate
		Emotional support	Told my eldest daughter, <daughter 1>, oh, "I'm feeling a bit down, feeling a bit depressed"—"oh what's the matter dad, what's the matter—get out, get out, go down the club, go down the club!" so she used to coax me like, you know, but she started taking me out on a Sunday to play Bingo, to get me out like, you know, and otherwise I wouldn't go out.	Ivor

and function of the social network. These changes can disrupt the taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions older adults hold about their relationships with other people. This point was illustrated in the narratives of two separated men, neither of whom, expected to be alone in later life and this challenged their assumptions and beliefs about the state of their spousal relationships.

It came as such a shock when she [wife] did leave that I just had to re-think my whole life, and as I say I'm just beginning to get it back together again. (Brian, 78, separated)

When you've lived with somebody and known somebody that long it just shattered me, it did, the fact that she went and no other reason than sex. (John, 72, divorced)

However, for others, it was long-held assumptions and beliefs about relationships with other family members that were challenged.

[Son] used to ring me up, "dad, can you take me down the surgery?" and […] I do go up there, pick him up. […] he'd come down here for dinner […] now I haven't got the car he won't come at all. (John, 72, divorced)

It was evident that all participants had expectations and long-held assumptions about their relationships. For both men, their expectations had not been met; this shook the foundations on which they had built their lives, affecting their sense of self and disrupting, the wider social networks. This disruption and their ability to reconstruct their biography had implications for their pathway through loneliness.

Disrupted Sense of Self

It was evident in participants' narratives that the experience of loneliness required "a fundamental re-thinking of biography and self-concept" (Bury, 1982, p. 169). Indeed, it was evident that some participants had not expected their lives to change so dramatically, and many struggled to accept the changes enforced on them.

[It was] mainly realising that life's not the same, life has changed, [since the death of her husband] you know, and I can't live it the way I was living it before […] life is so different now than what it was […]. you realise that things are not the same now. (Val, 67, widowed)

While for others, the emotional impact was not only disruptive, it forced them into finding new ways of living their lives alone.

I mean because she left so suddenly, I wasn't prepared for it, so I just had to sort of make it up, makeup living on my own as I went along and I'd have these sorts of moments of absolute desperation when I thought "I'll have to get her back, I'll have to get her back." (Brian, 78, separated)

For Brian, the loss of his wife coming so soon after relocating had represented a significant biographical disruption. Although he had created a new life and was transitioning out of loneliness, he acknowledged that there were difficulties in creating a new life. Ultimately, he had been able to find biographical continuity by reframing his separation from his wife and the subsequent loneliness within the context of his new life, enabling him to reconstruct his biography and his sense of self.

In contrast, for Val, the loss of her husband represented a significant biographical shift, changing her routine, her lifestyle, and her identity as a wife. She had attempted to maintain the status quo, continuing to live her life the way she had when her husband was alive. However, she found this exacerbated her feelings of loneliness, reinforcing the disruption she felt, resulting in implications for her loneliness trajectory.

The circumstances that led to loneliness also resulted in a disrupted sense of self.

I remember thinking about a week later, coming down the stairs I thought, and I took my wedding ring off, and I thought "I'm not married anymore", I'd been married since I was 16, I'd never known anything else, […] And to be single. And then I was afraid of anybody wanting to be friendly with me. (Dot, 68, widowed)

For widowed participants, the loss of a partner also meant the loss of a valued role as a wife/husband. For Dot, this was a role she had held since she was 16 years old, and it was an integral part of her identity. Although she had a strong support network around her, she questioned her friendships now she was no longer part of a couple.

In contrast, John's narrative illustrated how his sense of self had been disrupted by his wife, leaving him for a younger man. This was especially pertinent as John firmly believed that the reason his marriage ended was his inability to have a sexual relationship, and this had, to some extent, emasculated him. John expressed a sense of hopelessness in relation to his ability to sustain a new sexual relationship. A discredited identity and the disruption to his sense of self were further reinforced by his loneliness, as revealed in his narrative below:

Well my brother lives up the farm up there, and now and again I phone him up to say something, and he'll say "oh for Christ's sake shake up" because I'm not a person really, I never thought I'd get to the state I'm in now. (John, 72, divorced)

His reference to himself as "not a person" suggests that he was unable to reconcile the person he thought he was, with the lonely individual he had become. This disconnect further perpetuated the biographical disruption, challenging his sense of self, which in turn had a negative impact on his self-esteem. This manifested in a lack of confidence to engage in social activities alone.

I've never been used to being lonely, I worked on market stalls where you see loads of people, and I was also a foreman on a housing estate for thirty years, […] so I'd never been lonely until she decided that she wanted to go […] Somebody said, "well why don't you go into <pub chain> on a Saturday night?" Well, I passed there in the car, and it was heaving with people. I don't want to go in there with all them, cos like they were all in pairs and bunches. If I'd had somebody to go with me. (John, 72, divorced)

The lack of confidence not only perpetuated John's loneliness it reinforced the biographical disruption. His experience suggests that there may be a synergistic relationship between loneliness and biographical disruption, with each reinforcing the other over time, resulting

in a degenerating loneliness trajectory. This was evident across the narratives of those reporting stable or degenerating loneliness.

Disrupted Social Networks and the Mobilization of Resources

The events that trigger loneliness are the types of events which "prompt mobilisation of resources from social network members, bringing individuals, their families, and wider social networks face to face with the character of their relationships in stark form, disrupting normal rules of reciprocity and mutual support" (Bury, 1982, p. 169). The mobilization of resources was also found to be important in the loneliness transition. The findings indicate that how the social network responded had significant implications for the individual's loneliness trajectory. For some the events that triggered loneliness resulted in strengthening ties as illustrated by a 68-year-old Dot a widow who noted: "I don't have to wait for anybody to find out who I am or anything, you know, we are always with one another."

However, for others, these events resulted in weak social ties, as illustrated by John a divorced 72-year-old man who stated: "I've got a granddaughter that passes here about twice a week to go to town […] she don't come here." In common with other divorced/separated participants, the end of John's marriage had disrupted his familial relationships. It brought him face to face with the reality of the nature of those relationships. That his social network did not respond in the way he had anticipated, reinforced his biographical disruption.

This disruption to the social networks of participants was not restricted to divorced or separated participants but was consistent with the disruption reported by some widowed participants. As illustrated by Val, a younger widowed female who when discussing her daughter noted "my daughter, well she's got three children she haven't got time to feel it. […] She don't want to know, you know, she just brushes it aside […] because hurting isn't it, just brush it aside." Val, who was visually impaired, also reported disruption to one of her friendships stating that "I've got one friend and she's a good friend but, she just haven't got a clue and it's a bit too much trouble to have me tagging on like, you know."

The analysis also found that even when support was offered, it was not always taken up. For some participants, the normal rules of reciprocity and mutual support were disrupted by poor health or functional limitations inhibiting the take up of support.

> I don't play golf now, but one particular friend picks me up and takes me up the club twice a week, he's going up himself, so he takes me up […]. So, it's not too inconvenient to him, but it's embarrassing for me because I'm obligated to him. (Tom, 84, widowed)

Since the death of his wife, Tom had found himself increasingly reliant on friends to help him maintain his social activities. For him, the normal rules of reciprocity and mutual support were disrupted due to his poor health which left him unable to reciprocate. Subsequently, he limited the extent to which he would draw upon that support. Tom's experience was consistent with the narratives of other participants, including Jean, who spoke about her reliance on others since the loss of her partner. Despite having resources to mobilize, how participants' felt about receiving support was also important and could reinforce the biographical disruption shaping how participants felt about themselves and their value to other people.

Reconstructing Biography and Self-Identity

All participants perceived the events that led to loneliness as disruptive, yet, some were able to reconstruct their biography; this had significant implications for their loneliness trajectory. This was illustrated by one male participant who had been able to reframe the circumstances surrounding his transition into loneliness in a more positive light. This man noted that his experience had been beneficial for his creativity as an artist.

> I mean it seems a strange thing that I thought I'd never be able to say this, but I think in a sense after thirty years of marriage to her, she actually did me a favour, […]. She was a bit of a control freak, and I couldn't sort of express myself, expand outwards sort of thing, and although I did a bit of artwork, never amounted to much. […] I think she did me a favour because my artwork has definitely started to expand and my imagination is being creative, you know, generating more creativity. (Brian, 78, separated)

Reconstructing his biography by encompassing his experience into his identity as an artist, enabled this man to achieve a biographical flow, restoring his confidence and aiding his transition out of loneliness.

In contrast, some individuals were able to achieve a sense of biographical continuity by drawing on other valued identities. For some, it was a collective identity, such as faith.

> [being a Jehovah's witness] I mean it's just an ongoing thing, and I know that has been my lifesaver throughout life, you know, keeps me on the straight path. When you have difficult times with your family, it's that that's the important thing like. (Dot, 67, widowed)

Faith was also an important collective identity for Kate and Ivor who both ascribed to a faith that gave them a continued role even after the loss of other valued roles as a wife or husband/son.

For others, such as Pat, biographical continuity was achieved through the reframing of identity, replacing a valued role as a wife with a new role within the community, supporting others. This ability to reconstruct their biography or reframe their experiences had important implications for participant's loneliness trajectory. Individuals who were able to reconstruct their biography, achieving biographical flow or continuity, were those who transitioned out of loneliness. In contrast, individuals whose narratives indicated there was an ongoing disconnect between their past and current selves were those who transitioned into chronic loneliness. Jane, whose life had revolved around her husband and family, illustrates this point; she could not reconcile the fact that her life had changed dramatically, noting she had "lost my reason to live."

Discussion and Conclusion

In his seminal article written in 1982, Bury explored the notion of biographical disruption as a way of understanding the experience of living with chronic illness. We argue that the concept of "biographical disruption" has salience for those affected by loneliness. This can affect how they see themselves, their sense of self-worth, and change how others perceive them. This is important because historically, loneliness has been associated with shame, personal failing (Alberti, 2019), and stigma. Stigma occurs when there is a disconnect between a valued or virtual social identity and an actual social identity (Goffman, 2009). When an individual is associated with a stigmatizing attribute, it represents a discredited identity. Existing research has shown that fear of a loss of valued identity and fear of social rejection are important in sustaining loneliness (Goll et al., 2015).

To accommodate and normalize their disrupted situation, lonely individuals seek to accommodate the disruption into their lives. This process of adaption may involve renegotiating of biography to reflect altered relationships, the changes to self, and to encompass an altered future.

Biographical work is an ongoing process whereby individuals revise their past and future identities aligning them with future goals. This resonates with the core assumption of narrative gerontology, whereby meaning-making and identity development are lifelong processes (Bohlmeijer et al., 2011).

There was evidence to support this biographical work in the narratives of some of the participants. This was illustrated by one of the male participants whose initial conceptualization of his loneliness did not fit with his internalized self-identity. This disconnect between his past and present self challenged him to reconceptualize his loneliness, incorporating into his new identity as an artist, noting that a benefit of his loneliness was that it was conducive for creativity. In this way, this participant was able to achieve biographical flow, absorbing his new situation into a valued identity. Other individuals also achieved biographical flow or continuity by drawing on valued identities or reframing their experiences in a positive light, as illustrated above. Individuals who were able to resolve the dissonance between past and present selves reported a decrease in loneliness. In contrast, where the disconnect between past and present selves could not be resolved, this reinforced the sense of disruption, with all reporting a stable or degenerating loneliness trajectory.

The importance of biographical disruption for understanding loneliness trajectories lies in this biographical work and the availability of resources that can be mobilized to support or address the altered situation. Existing research demonstrates the adverse impact trigger events for loneliness can have on relationship quality, disrupting or fracturing social relations (Dykstra & De Jong Gierveld, 2004; Liu & Rook, 2013; Van Tilburg et al., 2015). This has implications for the mobilization of resources available to lonely individuals. The different circumstances surrounding a transition into loneliness carry different connotations for the individual. As well as having a profound effect on the individual's self-concept, these differences also impact on how others respond to them. For example, individuals who become lonely after the death of a spouse will elicit a different response from their social network than individuals who are separated or divorced (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007; Liu et al., 2013).

For some individuals, how their wider social networks responded was crucial to them overcoming the threat to self, enabling them to achieve biographical flow or continuity, enabling them to transition out of loneliness. However, where families and friends were unable or unwilling to offer support, individuals were brought face to face with the nature of some of their social relationships, reinforcing the sense of disruption.

The disruption was further reinforced through subsequent losses, such as deteriorating health. These cumulative losses reinforced the disruption experienced by some individuals, with each new knockback reinforcing the sense of loneliness. Indeed, there was evidence to suggest that there was a synergistic relationship between loneliness and biographical disruption with each reinforcing the other over time, resulting in a degenerating loneliness trajectory.

Viewing loneliness through the lens of biographical disruption facilitates a greater understanding of the loneliness trajectory. The findings show how affected individuals responded to their altered situation was determined by the extent of the biographical disruption, and whether the individual was able to reconstruct their biography considering their changed circumstances. This, in turn, was dependent on the meanings they ascribed to their altered situation as well as the resources they had at their disposal. Biographical disruption could be reinforced if strategies to alleviate loneliness proved to be unsuccessful.

This work has relevance when considering loneliness as a consequence of COVID-19 and an extended period of social distancing. As a result, many individuals may experience loneliness, because of social distancing and finding their expectations of support in a crisis have not been met. In contrast, others will have had social networks and communities that have responded with support. These findings may go some way to explaining differences in loneliness transitions once the risk of COVID has passed.

In addition, these findings may have implications for loneliness interventions that are unsuccessful on an individual basis. However, new personalized interventions drawing on the individual's valued identity may help them reframe their sense of self and assist them in achieving biographical flow or continuity.

Limitations

As with all qualitative studies, the findings cannot be generalized to the wider population, and there are limitations. First, five distinct loneliness trajectories have been identified: loneliness as a constant feature, as a new experience, increasing loneliness, decreasing loneliness, and never lonely (Victor et al., 2009). The research only captured three of the five trajectories (i.e., new experience, increasing, and decreasing). We acknowledge that where loneliness is a constant feature of someone's life, they may not experience it as a disruptive event but as normality. An additional limitation is the small number of individuals in each of the three loneliness trajectory groups. More research is needed to explore the concept of biographical disruption across different loneliness trajectories. As the study was conducted in the United Kingdom, with a largely white British sample and thus reflects an individualistic cultural context. The findings may differ in different cultural contexts. Finally, the data are now several years old, while this is a limitation; nevertheless, the findings remain relevant, particularly in understanding chronic loneliness in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Author Contributions

D. J. Morgan planned the study, performed the analysis, and wrote the article. V. Burholt helped plan the study and contributed to revising the article.

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