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Absence of other and disruption of self: an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the meaning of loneliness in the context of life in a religious community

Valeria Motta[1] · **Michael Larkin**[2]

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Abstract
Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is an idiographic approach to qualitative research. It is widely used in psychologically-informed studies which aim to understand the meaning and context of specific experiences. In this paper, we provide some background and introduction to the principles and processes underpinning IPA research. We extend this via a practical example, reporting on selected analyses from a study which explores the phenomenology and meaning of loneliness, through interviews conducted with a group of religious women. Through our observations on the complex role of absence for loneliness, we show that IPA can be a powerful tool for exploring and understanding the meaning of salient experiences. We reflect on the significance of the results for advancing theories of loneliness; and on the capacity of the IPA approach to provide researchers with an important and useful phenomenological perspective, through its emphasis on context, and its commitment to integrating convergent and divergent claims.

Keywords Qualitative · Phenomenology · Loneliness · Methods · IPA · Interviews

1 Introduction

Qualitative psychologists often distinguish between 'Big Q' Qualitative research, and 'small q' qualitative research. The heuristic was offered up by Kidder and Fine (1997), but it has endured because it captures something important. Anything which simply involves the collection and analysis of qualitative data can be 'qualitative

✉ Michael Larkin
m.larkin@aston.ac.uk

Valeria Motta
valerianmotta@gmail.com

[1] University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

[2] Aston University, Birmingham, UK

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research.' Small q work can sometimes be pragmatic, sometimes mechanistic or descriptive—even deductive. It often involves the identification of 'topics' discussed by relatively large samples of research participants. This is qualitative research defined by data type, rather than by epistemology and methodology.

'Big Q' signifies an understanding of the history and context of Qualitative approaches and a commitment to an analysis which focuses not on topics, but on patterns of meaning. Underpinning that commitment, the historical context provides important framing for the focus and limitations of these approaches, and for the means by which Qualitative researchers reflect on the differences *between* them. The linguistic (or discursive) turn in social psychology is critical here, because it solved some serious methodological problems by placing some constraints on the inferences which could be made from verbal reports. 'Naive realist' methods such as the early iterations of Grounded Theory had effectively treated language as representational, and taken participants' words at face value. In the context of psychology's longstanding scepticism about direct 'intrapsychic' inferences, this was problematic. Critiques (from feminist researchers in particular) had highlighted the gap between representation and reality. When the linguistic turn responded to those critiques in the 1980s and 1990s, drawing on the work of Austin, Garfinkel, Foucault, Searle and others, a space was cleared for a different kind of qualitative research. The rapid development and growth of discursively-oriented approaches (e.g. see Wetherell et al., 2001) showed that there were a range of ways to approach and analyse textual data whilst recognising that language was constructive and performative, rather than representational. Each of these variants on discourse analysis drew on distinctive blends of theoretical and conceptual sources to provide the researcher with a distinctive epistemological lens. The same principle was followed by methodologies drawing on phenomenological, narrative and psychoanalytic concepts, as other new approaches entered the space. Thus 'Big Q' Qualitative approaches tend to share a number of features: a clear commitment to recognising the constructive and contextual role of language, and a distinctive blend of theoretical and conceptual sources underpinning a specific epistemological focus.

Some phenomenological approaches to qualitative inquiry predate the linguistic turn. For example, Giorgi's approach followed the Dutch School in advocating for a reading of Husserl which directs third-person researchers to identify the *essential structure* of experiences from participants' accounts. Other more recent approaches, arising from developments in the field of neurophenomenology (e.g. Petitmengin, 2006; Hurlburt & Akhter, 2006) appear to have sidestepped this frame altogether, perhaps because they originated to meet the needs of the 'naturalizing phenomenology' agenda in experimental empirical research. However, a number of well-established, phenomenologically-orientated approaches *were* developed in the context of 'Big Q' commitments—notably, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009), Critical Narrative Analysis (Langdridge, 2007), the Embodied Lifeworld approach (Galvin & Todres, 2012), and to some extent, Template Analysis (Brooks et al., 2015) and Reflective Lifeworld Research (Dahlberg et al., 2008).

In this paper, we focus on IPA as a means of illustrating how a 'Big Q', phenomenologically-orientated, Qualitative approach can contribute to our understanding of others' experiences. We will highlight some of the ways in which IPA is distinctive

in its approach, as well as those features which it shares with other phenomenologically-focused approaches. We do this because the main aim of the special issue is to show different methodologies for studying human experiences. In the paper we also present the results of an IPA study on the experience of loneliness. We show the significance of these results and how they support advancements in current theories of loneliness. In this sense, both the methodology and the phenomenon alternate roles for what is figure and what is ground in this paper.

1.1 IPA

IPA as an approach was initially proposed and developed by Smith (1996) in the post-discursive social psychological context described above. Early studies were focused on experiences of self, relationship, embodiment, health and wellbeing. Methodological writing about IPA developed through a series of collaborations (e.g. Eatough & Smith, 2008; Larkin et al., 2006, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith et al., 2009). There are now many examples of its use across a wide range of topics and disciplines. As IPA has developed, methodological writing has consolidated around a number of key principles, with a degree of flexibility and innovation (e.g. see Smith & Eatough, 2019) encouraged beyond those core commitments. These core commitments can be framed as follows: IPA requires first-person accounts of an experience, event, process or relationship, which is of some significance to the respondent. In this first respect, it shares common ground with the other 'Big Q' phenomenological approaches above. It involves a researcher then closely examining the experiential accounts provided by *other* people. This is a feature shared with most phenomenologically-informed qualitative methods, but not with all philosophical writing in the tradition. IPA draws on a range of phenomenological writings for its conceptual grounding, including Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (see Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2007; Larkin et al, 2006, 2011). From these it takes the view that language has sufficient expressive power to convey someone's experience, under certain conditions. In IPA, understanding is possible through interpretation, *if* we are able to support our respondent in generating a rich account of their experience, and *if* we then think of that account as a means of understanding the respondent's position in the lived world, and thus *their relationship to the objects within it that are of most concern to them*.

In this respect, in IPA research, the commonplace term 'experience' means something more precise than it does in everyday, folk-psychological usage. 'Experience' here is shorthand for something more relational than intrapsychic: IPA researchers are interested in understanding the relationship between persons and those aspects of their world that are significant to them. 'In between' person and world is where meaning arises, and in IPA's Qualitative analysis, this is often framed explicitly through an examination of *language* which denotes or connotes *valence* (e.g. via reference to affect, emotion, feeling, mood, sensation, evaluation and appraisal) – or relates it through tone, metaphor and imagery. Ratcliffe (2019) argues that this kind of evaluation can be understood as 'emotional intentionality' and his conceptual argument places such a focus squarely within phenomenological territory.

All of this means that the outcome of IPA work – themes – are more than simply 'topics that were talked about.' They are also more specific than a generic 'pattern of meaning,' although a theme in IPA is a *kind* of 'pattern of meaning.' In a successful analysis, an IPA theme should function as an experiential statement, describing the participants' *relationship to a specific aspect of a given phenomena,* drawing out the meaning of that thing for them. This understanding of what constitutes a theme is distinctive from the more generic and flexible understanding found within Thematic Analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2021). In this respect, IPA's analytic outcomes are different to those for a number of other phenomenologically-oriented approaches, too, both within and outwith the 'Big Q' context where the focus might be on drawing out essential structures, rather than specific orientations or generic patterns of meaning.

IPA writing has generally taken the view that the researchers' reflections on preconceptions and process are important. Conversely—and in contrast to some of the phenomenological approaches which predate the discursive turn—IPA researchers generally do not consider a priori epoché to be either a realistic or desirable objective. Instead, IPA acknowledges that insights into our fore-understandings will *not* cease to arise until we cease attempting to understand our topic, and thus reflection is a cyclical commitment, rather than a procedural step. IPA's use of this material aligns more closely with the tradition of reflexive writing that is common across most 'Big Q' approaches (Gough & Finlay, 2003).

Sitting within both a specific hermeneutic phenomenological and the wider post-discursive qualitative traditions as it does, IPA research foregrounds the role of language, culture and other forms of contextual resources in coming to understand the meaning (and worldliness) of respondents' accounts. Research data for IPA studies can be drawn from a number of approaches, with the proviso that the data comprise a first person account, rich in detail, and focused upon the topic at hand. Typically, these are verbal data, often obtained from one-to-interviews with a researcher (see Smith et al., 2009), but other options such as diaries, asynchronous correspondence, cued recall interviews, group discussions, and multi-modal interviews can be employed. Some of these approaches also produce supplementary visual data. Often these alternatives are used when an experience might be more difficult to access or articulate for respondents in a standard interview setting (see Boden & Eatough, 2014). The style and aim of interviewing in IPA is similar to that in several other approaches to phenomenologically-informed research (e.g. see Langdridge, 2007; Willig, 2012). The researcher's role is to be curious, open-minded and exploratory, and to avoid leading and directive questions, in order to support the participant in *describing* the experience in their own words, and *reflecting* on how they think and feel about it. Given that the subsequent analysis will draw carefully upon the semantic content of the interview, there is caution about introducing external terms and concepts. It is considered good practice to prompt for elaboration ('Can you tell me more about that?'), evaluation ('What was that like for you?) and reflection ('What were you feeling when that happened?). In this respect, IPA interviewing generally aligns itself with standards of good practice in 'Big Q' interviewing, which seek to understand the respondent' *sense-making* (e.g. see Madill, 2012) via an interaction with a researcher.

This conceptual commitment to understanding context is implemented by a methodological commitment to idiographic-level analysis – to understanding the particular. This is a further distinctive feature: the reader of an IPA account should come away with some sense of divergence *and* convergence within the data.

To illustrate these points further, we move now to a discussion of insights from a study of a specific experience (loneliness) as understood by a specific population (nuns) in a specific context (religious life). This kind of formulation is important for IPA research in general, because the logic of sample construction (identifying respondents who share some commonalities of perspective, demographics or context in relation to the topic) allows IPA to meet its commitments to idiography and contextualising meaning. Our choice in this paper reflects a number of the core commitments discussed above.

1.2 Loneliness

Loneliness is *salient* because it is a disruptive human experience, with distinctive features (e.g. see Achterbergh et al., 2020) and significant consequences (e.g. see Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Loneliness has been addressed from different disciplinary perspectives such as the psychological (Perlman & Peplau, 1982), sociological (Bowman, 1955; Riesman et al., 1961; Slater, 1976), neuroscientific (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008), philosophical (Moustakas, 1961; Svensden, 2015) and multidisciplinary (e.g., Mijuskovic, 2012; Willock et al., 2012). These approaches have brought their lenses to bear on different aspects of the phenomenon. Some have focused on the multifaceted nature of loneliness (addressing the interaction between specific behaviours, emotions and thoughts), while others have focused primarily on cognitive aspects. For instance, the cognitive discrepancy approach, proposes that cognitive processes are at the cause of loneliness, and defines it as the aversive state experienced when there is a discrepancy between the interpersonal relationships a person *wishes* to have, and those that she *perceives* she has (Perlman & Peplau, 1982). Another example is the social needs approach which underlines the role that early influences play in generating and maintaining loneliness (Fromm-Reichmann, 1959; Sullivan, 1953; Weiss, 1973). The cause of loneliness, according to this approach, is the absence of relationships "which are not necessarily intimate or confident in nature, but rather enable the meeting of one's inherent social needs such as attachment, social integration, nurturance, reassurance of worth, reliance alliance, and guidance" (Weiss, 1987; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006, p. 708). The existential approach, on its side, takes into account the role of culture in the emergence of loneliness. Loneliness here is seen as part of the human condition and as an effect of living in a modern society (Moustakas, 1961). According to Moustakas loneliness arises in contemporary society because individuals no longer participate directly in the creation of the vital needs of their families and communities. Moustakas suggests that through interactions based on expected conduct and prescribed behaviour, the modern individual has become anonymous and their connections have been reduced to superficial encounters. This leads the modern individual to no longer enjoy the company of others (Moustakas, 1961). According to Moustakas

"loneliness is an intrinsic and organic reality of human life in which there is both pain and triumphant creation emerging out of long periods of desolation. In existential loneliness man is fully aware of himself as an isolated and solitary individual while in loneliness anxiety man is separated from himself as a feeling and knowing person."(Moustakas, 1961, p. 24).

Influenced by the awareness that social relations play a fundamental role in psychological well-being, mental health researchers have tended to integrate work on loneliness and social support. Thus in the existent literature on loneliness there is a prevailing tendency to focus on social relationships, on the nature of humans as social beings, and on the distress that the lack of social relationships can cause. But this is just one aspect of the experience. Be it an unmet need for social relations, a dysfunction in cognition, perception or behaviour related to social relations, a marker of a deficit in social relations, or even a necessary experience, if we define loneliness in terms of social relationships, it becomes primarily and, in some cases *solely,* connected with sociality (Motta, 2021). This has led health researchers to overlook other important aspects of the phenomenon, which is problematic when it comes to distinguishing loneliness from other adjacent experiences such as solitude and social isolation.

Loneliness is an essential phenomenological topic with a unique intentional structure that affects the entire experiential field.

In the phenomenological and hermeneutic tradition, philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt and Hans-Georg Gadamer consider loneliness on the one hand, as an ontological determination of our Being and, on the other, as a cause for some of the most worrisome problems of our times, such as the origins of totalitarism or the phenomenon of self-alienation. Adrian Costache points out that these philosophers offer us insights for our investigations on the nature of alterity, but they do not address in detail the challenges that solitude and loneliness pose (Costache, 2013).

Some of the interesting ideas from these authors for us are that their proposals address not only matters about our being-with-others, but also considerations about "how to remain in dialogue with ourselves while being with others" (Costache, 2013, p. 138). Whether this dialogue is pre-lingual, as we find in Heidegger (1962, 1995), or given through language, as we find in Gadamer (1988, p. 111–113), this directs our attention towards understanding how loneliness can be about our relationship *with ourselves*.

We also find another interesting commonality in these accounts. They all relate to our individuation and how it is asserted in a world where we live with others. That is, in our effort to assert ourselves as individuals, we encounter others who have the same ontological status. Here a tension emerges: others have the role of either enabling my individuation or conditioning it. In Arendt's account, for instance, we find that: "when our desire to be understood and recognized in our totality is frustrated, and our ability to disclose our full uniqueness to our friends is inhibited, we feel lonely to the degree that we do not appear as a self in the world"(Arendt 1951, p. 477; Lucas, 2019, p. 715–716). Our perspective on loneliness is directly related to this tension. When I am not recognized by others in my uniqueness, this has direct impact in my appearing in the world, as well as in my feeling lonely. In a more

recent example, Tietjen and Furtak (2021) propose that there is a dialectical relationship between loneliness and friendship. When loneliness occurs within the most intimate friendships, this is due to the intrinsic limits of language and communication that do not always enable complete understanding and recognition (Tietjen & Furtak, 2021). Thus, becoming a self in conversation with others is an infinite task. And loneliness is painful because we need others in order to become ourselves, and it may be the case that these others may be absent.

These philosophical accounts have something in common with those from the social sciences and mental health: a prevailing focus on the role of others in order to understand the experience of loneliness.

We wish to present an analysis that extends go beyond this dyadic dynamic where it is the interplay between ourselves and others that circumscribes the descriptions of the experience. In other words, our interest was in exploring questions that would take us further from the absence of other people and deeper into the experiential aspects of loneliness.

Loneliness is deeply disruptive of people's experience of the world. For this we looked at how attunement to a range of elements in the environment, rather than only feeling connected to people, influences people's experiences of loneliness. Furthermore, we wanted to address what was missing from the previous work done on the phenomenology of loneliness where relatively little of it is grounded in, and developed from, a close reading of people's first-person accounts. In our wider project, we also wanted to explore the distinction between loneliness and solitude and inquire into the positive aspects of solitude (see Motta, 2021; Motta & Bortolotti, 2021).

In order to properly describe the felt character and the different experiential dimensions of loneliness, it was important to start by analyzing the linguistic expressions with which loneliness is described. These expressions go from aesthetic appreciations (an empty/crowded city) to physical sensations (heart wrenching). Different and even expressions of opposite value are also usually combined to describe the experience. The aim was to reconstruct the world of the lonely in as much detail as possible, paying careful attention to the linguistic expressions that the person uses to describe her world and her relationship with it. IPA allowed us to conduct this type of research. IPA is a good fit for our research because it situates such meanings in their contexts: loneliness is generally held to be a universal human experience, but it is nevertheless given shape and meaning by the context in which it is formed and lived.

One might well choose an IPA approach to explore the meaning of something precisely *when* we are interested in understanding *not only* the most common or stable aspects of that experience, *but also* those which arise only when we occupy a specific position in relation to it. Convents, and the religious and cultural practices which sustain them, provide a distinctive context for experiencing people's sense of connection and disconnection with one another, with their environment, and with the changes they experience. Just as we might – in conceptual analysis—learn something about empathy by considering how it overlaps with, and can yet be distinguished from, sympathy, so in data analysis, we can explore convergent *and* divergent meanings. In the following analysis, we aim to explore some of these issues by

examining the five main thematic structures we derived from analysis of our participants' accounts of religious life.

This context also provides the opportunity to revise theories of loneliness that distinguish between individual, social and collective loneliness. Loneliness has been connected to the perceived absence of specific people in one or more of three different dimensions of our attentional space: *intimate, relational or collective* (Cacioppo et al., 2015; Hawkley et al., 2012). In this line of thought, the *intimate or emotional* type of loneliness (as in Weiss, 1973), for instance, is characterized as "the perceived absence of a significant someone (e.g. a spouse), that is, a person one can rely on for emotional support during crises, who provides mutual assistance, and who affirms one's value as a person" (Cacioppo et al., 2015, p. 4). The women interviewed, had chosen to join a Catholic order, and were expected to dedicate their lives to the service of the community. They are expected to not have families of their own. This provided a unique opportunity to explore aspects of loneliness that were not related to absence of partners. Another interesting feature of the group of women that we interviewed is that they led lives that took them to environments that were very different from their own, having gone on missions to different parts of the world and at different times of political, social and racial unrest. This helped foreground and explore ways in which environmental disruptions can be part of the experience of loneliness. In addition, the participants from this group incorporate introspection and self-reflection into their daily routines. Taken together, we hoped that these qualities would facilitate access to aspects of the experience of loneliness and solitude that have been underexplored and are less well understood.

2 Method

2.1 Approach

Our design involved opt-in recruitment, to take part in one-to-one, in-depth interviews, which were conducted by the first author.

2.2 Ethical approval

The study plan received ethical review and approval from the Research Ethics Committee in the School of Life and Health Sciences at the second author's workplace.

2.3 Context

We made contact with a convent in central England. The convent is a community of Catholic religious women who describe themselves as having freely chosen to submit to vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience to a life-long service of god and the neighbour. The Sisters of this order are described as committing their lives and resources to the service of others. For the study of loneliness, there is an interesting ambiguity to this particular environment. It offers possibilities for studying

detachment as well as connection and for exploring the different aspects involved in the interaction between the individual and the rest of the community. We explore these issues in the analysis below.

2.4 Recruitment

A senior sister at the convent kindly agreed to act as a gatekeeper for the study. She provided general information about the research to other sisters in the community. The first author attended the convent and gave a presentation about the research. Potential participants were invited to 'opt-in' to the study by expressing their interest directly to the research team.

2.5 Participants

IPA usually requires a reasonable degree of homogeneity within a given sample, because its commitment to *idiographic depth* is generally met via close examination of a relatively small sample of cases, and its commitment to *addressing context* is generally met by working with some commonality of perspective on the experience-at-hand.

The participants were 6 religious women, all of whom were living in or near to the same convent, in a city in central England. Our participants came from an order with a long tradition of providing education to the underprivileged, care for orphans, and support for marginalised and excluded communities, in England, Eastern Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa).

2.6 Data collection

The first author conducted all of the interviews, which were audio recorded, in a quiet room at the convent. We planned for the interviews to have two parts, where the second, follow-up part was optional. The first part flexibly followed an interview guide, which used a series of open-ended questions to elicit and explore participants' experience of solitude, loneliness, relationships and connectedness via a range of activity-based discussions. For the follow-up, participants were asked to bring (or send) the researcher an object, image, piece of music, art or writing which reflected some aspect of the experiences they had described in their interview. Participants were also asked to provide a brief description of what their chosen object or image meant to them; either verbally, or in writing. Five brought pieces of writing; one brought a photograph. All interviews were fully transcribed, anonymised, and further supplemented by reflective process notes.

The participants described experiences of loneliness as well as solitude[1]: we focus on the former here. All the sisters talked about moments when they felt lonely in great detail. There was just one sister who said she never felt lonely. She talked

[1] A further paper (Author, forthcoming) will present the analysis of the experience of solitude.

about obstructions to communication instead and provided a journal with material written and collected during her time in Europe. The journal contains quotes from the Bible that make reference to experiences of loneliness and solitude.

2.7 Data analysis

The first author conducted the analysis, and met frequently with the second author to discuss the developing focus and organisational structure of the analysis. We followed the broad process described by Smith and Osborn (2007).

We began with a detailed reading of each case. This reading involved exploratory coding: annotating the features of interest and the researcher's reflections in the margin of the text. In IPA, this preliminary coding is partly about mapping out the data, and—in parallel—identifying areas where the researchers' preconceptions and interests are likely to be important.

In each case, the first author then conducted further, more detailed, line-by-line annotation. In the IPA literature, a range of strategies are described for this stage, all of which are intended to help the researcher to identify and explore meanings within the text. We included specific analytic strategies described in Larkin et al. (2006) and in Larkin and Thompson (2011). These involve identifying the objects of concern (things that matter to the participant, in the world that they describe) and characterising the participant's relationship to those objects (the meanings which those objects appear to have for the participants, on the basis of the language used to describe them, and the way they are talked about). The use of these concepts in coding helps to give some structure to the world that is revealed in the participant's account, and in each object's case, it foregrounds the 'meaning for' the participant, by reflecting on how that meaning is created through language, imagery and tone. In phenomenological terms, this approach highlights and categorises all of the semantic content which tells us something about participants' orientation towards the salient features of their world. It enables us to begin to develop *experiential statements* which capture this content succinctly, and from these to cluster and develop *themes.*

We organised the coding for each transcript in a table, to maintain the connection between the interpretative material (objects and their meanings) and the source material (data extracts and line numbers). This document formed the basis for a case-level summary, which was developed for each participant's transcript.

In each transcript, the first author then added proposals for possible case-level themes, working at a higher level of abstraction. From this, we developed a table of superordinate themes for the first case, within which the subordinate themes were 'nested' with identifying information (where instances supporting the theme can be found within the interview transcript).

The first author repeated this process for each case. The second author provided feedback and reflection throughout the process and audited themes to ensure that they were well represented in the transcripts. After the analysis was conducted for each case, we reviewed the case summaries together, to explore and discuss patterns across cases.

2.8 Reflections

The first author brought prior training in phenomenology to the project. In addition, a familiarity with the context (Catholic religious communities) helped her to develop a trusting atmosphere where private emotional experiences could be shared. This relationship was developed over a series of visits to the convent. All along the interviewing process, the first author kept a reflective journal where impressions, feelings and ideas were spelled out. These ideas were shared in supervision with the second author, which allowed for the process to be clear and transparent. The second author brought experience with IPA and qualitative research methods, and familiarity with the standards of research ethics.

Our interdisciplinary conversations included impressions and clarifications on the methodology throughout the interviews and analysis process. Interdiscipliniarity forces experts to be constantly questioning their respective disciplines' methods and terminology. The second author's expertise with IPA helped by showing the different ways that analysis can develop. This provided a framework for the first author to organise the ideas and interpretations that were emerging from the data. The first author's research on loneliness and solitude and her background in phenomenology were an asset in clarifying concepts and focus. Having also expertise in philosophy of science, the first author was not just interested in the experiences of loneliness and solitude, but also in evaluating IPA for investigating these experiences.

3 Analysis

Our analysis points to loneliness as a deeply felt distressing experience of absence, which also prevents one from fully experiencing oneself. We discuss this via five main themes:

1. Loneliness as a deeply felt distressing experience of absence;
2a. Absence as a loss of possibilities to act, to share, to experience
2b. Absence arising from a feeling of being out of step
3. The disrupted self
4. The role of others: not being seen, not being heard
5. When loneliness ends: Getting back to 'the rhythm of life'; 'settling' and finding peace

We begin our analysis with a detailed examination of one passage from one participant, Sister Bertha. The passage illustrates many features that are present in the other accounts, though in each case these have their own distinctiveness. In the section quoted here, Sister Bertha responds to a question about times in her life when she experienced loneliness:

> Yes, I'll start with two periods of my life when I can say something about loneliness. In sort of a deeper way than, you know, the lonely moments you can have in any day and any specific time and that are just passing. […] I

> should never forget that period of loneliness. I felt I was on my own. I mean in my heart. I mean the place was full, there were a hundred people living about. But this period, you know, I can still feel the pain. […]
> And then, another time when I had a real stretch like that again was … that was 1954 when I entered [the convent]. And the next big stretch for me was when I volunteered to go to Africa … South Africa. I was excited about going in the missions. I went to this gorgeous country… and lovely new school and we were new sisters coming from England and we had a great welcome. And the same thing hit me […] And I thought: 'Oh, it's a beautiful country, and I'm so kind of … I'll never be able to stay here. I can't bear it, it's too far away and my heart was bleeding again.' And I had forgotten about the first bleed. [...]
> I was a different person in a different place but the intensity and the loss …was equally deep. And I should have known from the first loneliness [chuckles] .

One important feature of this passage is that it illustrates the distinctiveness which loneliness has for Sister Bertha. Through this distinctive quality (a painful intensity of feeling, which she associated with the heart, with bleeding, and with loss), Bertha was able to locate the times in her life when she had felt lonely. The distinctiveness of loneliness was evident for all of our participants. It was known, and identifiable, and easily distinguished from other, more mundane experiences ('you know, the lonely moments you can have in any day and any specific time and that are just passing').

For Sister Bertha, the experience is memorable for the sort of distress that it caused: 'I can still feel the pain', and 'I should have known from the first loneliness'. In her interview, Sister Bertha spoke of three times when there was no doubt for her that she was experiencing loneliness. She distinguished these from other 'passing' experiences on the basis of how poignant, 'intense' and 'deep' they felt. This is also reflected in the use of metaphors that give form to her temporal experience. Bertha's periods of loneliness are referred to as 'stretches', invoking both physical effort, and the idiomatic form of referring to a prison sentence. Perhaps the most striking imagery arises when Sister Bertha talks about a bleeding heart. This is a powerful metaphor. The Sacred Heart is one of the most familiar devotional images in the Catholic faith. It is depicted by a wounded heart that bleeds. The heart is crowned with thorns and has a cross on top that emerges from flames. There are several interpretations of what this symbol means. The agreement is that this symbol is where bodily and spiritual enlightenment coincide. The image brings allusion to the crucifixion, sacrifice and pain. Sister Bertha may have brought it up in relation to the union of the physical and emotional pain experienced in loneliness. She may also be referring to the sacrifice that a feeling of separation and loss represents.

Another characteristic that we see very clearly in this excerpt is the experience of contrast. Bertha describes the beauty of the country she visits, of the new school, and reflects on her enthusiasm for going. She then immediately mentions the pain she experienced. In another part of the interview she says: "I would endure this awful feeling and this beauty." The contrast also highlights a perceived separation (or discontinuity) between an emotional experience and what is described as the external appearance of the world. In Bertha's account, loneliness appears to given

form and meaning through these contrasts. When she is surrounded by people, she says: "And I felt I was on my own. I mean in my heart. I mean the place was full, there were a hundred people living about." This resonates with the themes relating to 'absence' and 'the role of others', as we discuss further below.

Finally, Sister Bertha's account reveals one other important manifesting quality of loneliness: it can happen regardless of age or place. Sister Bertha says: "I was a different person in a different place but the intensity and the loss …". Loss was an aspect repeated by all the participants. This pain and loss is that, as the passage illustrates, it is experienced even when surrounded by others. This is one of the most striking characteristics of loneliness. In our discussion of the thematic structure, below, we will explore how this is possible.

1. Loneliness as a deeply felt distressing experience of absence

What is lost is only partly related to people. The following passage is one of the many that represents the central aspects of the experience of loneliness:

> I went from a place where I was managing and enjoying things to a new place that didn't have the old friends again and the old experience, totally new. And again the pain in my heart and I remember saying to one of the sisters after a week of being there. I said: 'Oh, it's a beautiful country and everybody is so nice. But I'll never settle.' And that was absolutely true then. And I couldn't see anything, couldn't see myself. And I should have remembered the way back when I had that first big break again that made me heartbroken. But it didn't, you know my rationale was here I was now. […] It was about what my heart had left back here and it was gone. And then it takes a while for things to catch up and settle.

Sister Bertha is referring to many aspects of the experience. The use of the word 'place' can be interpreted in two ways. Bertha is referring to leaving one physical place that felt familiar (the convent in England) and going to a new one (the mission in Africa). She went from a familiar place where she had friends, to a new place. This produced 'a big break' that made her 'heartbroken'. She does not only refer to the friends she lost, or the physical place: she also refers to 'the old experience' that she lost. This is reinforced when she says she could appreciate the beauty of the new place but that she 'couldn't see anything'. Bertha is able to appreciate beauty but she is unsettled, and her ability to participate in this beauty is disturbed. Going from an old place *to* a new place is also going *from* an old way of experiencing the world, and adapting to a new one. It is as if the participant has lost her way of orienting herself in the world. Her own position and perspective in the world is lost ('couldn't see myself'). She adds: 'It was all about what my heart had left and *it was all gone*.' It is interesting that it is the heart (a symbol of authenticity, self and emotion) which she signals as the vehicle of her loss. Here, her heart has no point of orientation. Bertha's case, and her use of the heart image, exemplifies a meaning of loneliness which was salient for many of our participants: that loneliness was a form of loss and that what was lost was a the sense of one's own place in the world, the possibility of understanding oneself and the sense of meaningful connection to others.

2a. Absence as a loss of possibilities to act, to share, to experience

At any given time, many experiences are 'not present for us', but are also unnoticed, and thus do not cause any distress. By contrast, our participants described very distinct experiences of absence: these were intensely lived, memorable and had a specific duration. Participants knew exactly when, why and how they started. And they knew what they were feeling when they started. Rather than going unnoticed, absences may be experienced as distressing and disruptive when they cannot go unnoticed. To some extent, the meaning of loneliness was constituted by this awareness of absence.

Absences can be triggered when there are obstructions to the possibility of action. We have seen this already in the extract where Bertha did not see herself because of how unknown the place was. In another example, Sister Sophia reflected on her frustration when she felt she was not able to communicate. She described a time when she felt that another Sister had not appreciated a reading she had given, and another when she had been on a mission overseas where she did have the linguistic skills to make herself adequately understood. On these two different occasions, Sophia felt that her voice was silenced, and this provoked frustration and a feeling of disconnection for her. Sophia's account was a little different to that of the other participants, because she tended to focus on connection, rather than disconnection.

Insights into thwarted connection are an important aspect of understanding loneliness. Numerous qualities and feelings that may get in the way of connection: Sister Sophia spoke about experiencing negative emotions in such terms. In response to a question about particular instances when she felt lonely, Sophia replied:

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

Despite declaring herself as a jolly person, throughout the interview Sophia spoke about moments in her life when language and negative emotions (such as feeling upset and disconnected from someone else, in this example) were experienced as impediments to communication, and as causes of distress and disconnection.

Not every instance of negative emotion is an occasion for loneliness. Sister Augusta, for instance, told how she found it challenging to help a vulnerable friend in distress. Sister Bernice also told how she sometimes struggled to teach rebellious students. On these occasions, despite their distress, our respondents did not experience loneliness. What makes Sister Sophia's experiences play out as *instances of absence* is that in these moments, important aspects of Sophia's self are impeded from appearing *as* herself, *to* herself. Her self-experience is disrupted. Thus we might paraphrase the text above: 'I'm usually a jolly person but this prevents me from thinking of myself as lonely. I became upset at someone else's failure to appreciate me, and lost myself in this feeling of disconnection.' This will be clearer when we see the third theme, below. Negative emotions do not always feel like impediments to acting or to appearing in a specific role. When they do, they are cause for experiencing disruption of self and disconnection.

2b. Absence arising from a feeling of being out of step

The perception of absence can also be triggered by a perceived desynchronization, mismatch, or change in the environment. In all the experiences of loneliness that the participants described, there was a pervasive feeling of being left behind, out of sync or out of place. It is worth rephrasing Bertha describing loneliness: 'When you go from a place where you manage and enjoy things to a new place that does not have the old friends and the old experience.'

Some ways of being out of step related specifically to desynchronization and a mismatch between one's own time, and the world's time. This is present in Sister Bernice's description of what she called the 'real loneliness' that she experienced when arriving late for boarding school. Sister Bernice felt out of sync with others who had found their place within the school and settled into its rhythm. This is interesting when we think about what the opposite of loneliness—*settling*—meant for Sister Bertha: it involves getting into a routine with others.

Other oppositions that pervade the experience are related to a physical place (where England is 'near' and Africa is 'far'); to a difference in temperature (when in England it is cold, in Africa it is hot). As we saw in Bertha's account, loneliness involved a perceived contrast between the self and the environment, between the 'inner' feeling and 'outer' environment, a mismatch between what is seen and what is felt: 'I would endure this beauty and this pain.' In this theme, we note that this sense of incongruence was a common feature across the accounts. A perfect illustration of this mismatch is provided in this excerpt from Sister Bernice:

> But then that first Christmas. That was, again, I was very lonely. So there were actually three times: when I went boarding, when I left England to go to Africa, I cried so much on the boat. Some would say you'll offend the sea (chuckles) I didn't. And then, that first Christmas in Africa. For all of us. We were a group, quite a nice little group, we were very lonely. Just on the hottest day of the year. And we went through all the traditions of turkey and ham, even sitting around. We had heavy heavy habits in those days.

It is striking in the extract how this was a group of sisters who were all *lonely together.* In this case, the sense of mismatch arises from an instance of the incongruence that can be experienced when rituals and traditional holidays are celebrated differently, or when they are uprooted from the relational and local context which make them meaningful. Sister Bernice was very clear about going through all the traditions but the fact that these were stripped their usual context meant that the Sisters felt lonely, even when they had each other. The fact that this was experienced by the group emphasizes the importance of our attunement to a *range* of elements in the environment, as opposed to only feeling connected to *people* in the experience of loneliness. It is important to note that this emerges in the analysis. The participants did not explicitly mention this opposition, and what this indicates is that the different sorts of experiences of desynchronization may be happening at a pre-reflective level.

3. The disrupted self

In the above mentioned passage Sister Bertha said: 'I could not see anything. I couldn't see myself.' An excerpt from Sister Margaretta echoes what Bertha is saying. Here, Sister Margaretta talks about the time before becoming a nun, when she initially chose to work as a nurse in London, instead of joining the convent:

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

What this passage highlights is the connection between loneliness and the ability to experience a specific aspect of oneself. In the case of Bertha, it was the new environment that caused her to not even see what place and role she was going to occupy. In the case of Margaretta, she was comparing the life she was living with the life that she knew she was running away from. The passage speaks for all the participants, each one of whom echoes the distress experienced when an aspect of the self cannot be developed or displayed. The experience of absence here seems to point at a non-developed or potential aspect of the self. This idea will be further developed in the discussion.

4. The role of others: not being seen, not being heard

Participants described how difficulties in sharing what they were experiencing could be a trigger for feelings of absence and loneliness. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is with an extract from Sister Augusta's interview:

> [Loneliness is] something you feel when someone you feel connected to is gone…when you grieve and nobody looks at your grief.

Here an interpersonal connection is lost and it is related to a specific someone's absence. But the experience of loneliness is not just about the loss of a connection with a specific person, it includes having an experience of nobody being there to 'witness' this experience. We clearly see this when Augusta describes it loneliness as: 'When you grieve and nobody looks at your grief'.

On some occasions, loneliness arises when people lose specific people. Some losses are more fundamental than others, just as our connections with different people are at different levels. Sister Augusta talks about different degrees of connection:

> You're on a different base, you're on a different kind of platform. You're on a more secure kind of base…whereas normally, our relationships are tentative because you say so much and you are watching the reaction of the other person [...] But I wouldn't share … uhm …I wouldn't allow myself to be vulnerable with some people.

The loss of someone that she had a deeper connection with made her led Augusta to fdescribe that loss as real loneliness. Here she talks about the death of her father:

> Loneliness … (*pauses*) I suppose when my father died I thought … yeah there was a sense of real loneliness then. Cause I felt very connected to him. And then he was gone and my mother was grieving and everybody was grieving and nobody's looked at my grief (*chuckles*). And I thought: "What about my grief?" Who was there to pick up my grief? But there wasn't anybody, cause everybody is grieving.

Here again, it is not just the death of her father, it is the fact that she could not share her grief with anybody which made Augusta feel a sense of real loneliness: 'Everybody is grieving', but rather than this being a shared experience, here it means that no one person's grief is especially significant and, more importantly, that grief prevents us from seeing others.

Not being able to share experiences is a fundamental part of experiencing loneliness. It is precisely here where lies the role of others. Many of the possibilities for displaying our own experiences are related to the presence of others. We see this in many excerpts from Sister Catherine's interview. Together with another sister and four priests, Catherine spent many years of her life working in a retreat in England where she saw many different people with different kinds of emotional suffering, who visited the center. She talks about what she saw in those who were lonely:

> And I found those [moments at the retreat center] … priceless because there were so many people who were just so … well probably a bit lonely.[…] But when people are very lonely and churned, they just want something to, to … distract them almost. They don't realize it but it doesn't … lots of times it doesn't work.
> Well that was mainly … they were really looking … often they were looking for peace. They were looking for tranquility. But they were looking for answers as well. Sometimes people came in really hurt and broken, and wounded.
> The biggest thing of all there was listening. I probably did far more listening to people than talking. And so often that's just what people wanted. Because, you know the hustle and the bustle of the world today.

This passage is very enlightening. Others create possibilities for us to act and to experience (people were 'looking for someone, just to help them to experience'). That is, others seem to open a field of possibilities for action ('I did an awful lot of listening'). Catherine's role while listening was, as she describes it in the passage, to help people to experience. This suggests that when the other is absent, it is as if a part of the environment is absent. But the role that the other plays in the environment is fundamental to the self, because every experience is

co-experienced in the sense that it can be shared through communication. The role that others have is fundamental for us to be able to experience ourselves fully. In this sense, this absence may not be the absence of a specific person but of a more general Other. The experience of absence may be more structural than the specific, physical absence of the person. We will expand on this idea in the Discussion.

5. When loneliness ends: getting back to 'the rhythm of life'; 'settling' and finding peace.

The period when loneliness ended is described by Bertha as the period 'things take to catch up and settle.' She says:

> I would endure this awful feeling and this beauty. I would endure it for a year. Almost to save face. And it was sort of in the endurance, you know? I deliberately didn't change my mind but it faded. […] And of course, you begin to settle. And get to know the children of the country and the parents and the rhythm of life there and settling to a new community.

Sister Bertha says she suffered through this period until she settled for the second time. She describes settling as beginning to 'know the children of the country and the parents', but settling into a new community also means 'getting to know the rhythm of life'. This is a good example of why IPA's interest in the work done by language can be so informative. Here, 'settle' presents us with the possibility of making two interpretations. One refers to settling into a specific physical place or territory (becoming comfortable, at home) and another refers to an emotional state of being at ease, finding oneself in place, of being calmed (entering a state of calm and peace). In another relevant interview extract, Sister Margaretta says:

> So I entered [the convent]. Oh, it was so difficult, the silence. At the beginning, we had strict silence. Totally different from the community at home [...] After one month: "Definitely," I thought to myself, "Definitely, this is where I belong." Because I had such peace. Now, it was very strict, but the strictness didn't affect me in that it was breaking my heart or anything like that. I was sad of course after leaving my sisters and brothers and parents but … I had a peace. And I had been running away and suddenly I had found this peace (which I come home from there) and I never lost it.

Restlessness in connection to loneliness emerges in all the sisters' accounts. This is contrasted with peace and silence in connection to being at home and 'being with.' This experience of peace seemed to be related to finding oneself to be a fully present agent. In order to experience myself as an agent, I need to experience myself in relation to others, and to my own self, and both of these aspects of me need to be acceptable to me, congruent with me, in their appearing and enactment. Conversely, loneliness is a signal that these possibilities are being lost.

4 Discussion

In our introduction, we described how IPA research is typically focused upon experiences of some existential significance. To illustrate this, we have presented an analysis of the experience of loneliness, as it was understood by a group of interviewees living in a convent. We emphasised that IPA focuses on understanding the world from a respondent's point-of-view via the language that they use to evoke that perspective. It reaches for the meanings of the salient features in their world, as these meanings show up for them. In this study, we accessed our participants' perspectives via a series of in-depth, one-to-one interviews. In our analysis, we have drawn attention to some of the work that their linguistic choices does to communicate meaning (the imagery of the heart; the dual meanings of 'settling'; the different ways of talking about loneliness as absence and loss), and we have used this to make the case for a series of themes. These themes represent our interpretative view of the patterns of meaning in our respondents' accounts: we argue that the interviews give us insight into loneliness not only as disconnection from others, but also as a disjunction from self and self-knowledge. In presenting this, we have reflected on the perspectives that we brought to this (our different disciplinary and cultural backgrounds), and on the unique context in which loneliness was foregrounded for our interviewees. We note that choosing the life that they lead may allow some of its challenges to be experienced as virtues (as in Margaretta's account of leaving London, for example) in a journey towards spiritual and personal authenticity. We note also that while many of the themes we discuss relate to all our participants' accounts, there are some exceptions, especially in the case of Sophia. Nevertheless, through Sophia's emphasis on connection (rather than disconnection) the sense of thwarted possibility is foregrounded as a cross-cutting feature of distress and absence.

4.1 How do our findings relate to the literature on loneliness?

The results of this study extend some prevailing views about the experience of loneliness. We have noted already that loneliness has been connected to the perceived absence of specific people in one or more of three different dimensions of our attentional space (the *intimate, relational or collective*). It is beyond the scope of this methods-orientated paper to expand in depth here on the relationship between the phenomenological philosophy of loneliness, and the insights gained from our participants' accounts. However, one important observation is that in our study, loneliness was not always directed at the perceived absence of specific *people*. Experiences of absence were also articulated in other ways by our participants. This suggests that loneliness includes experiencing *different* kinds of absences. The participants expressed loss of other people as well as loss of experience. They identified the loss of an aspect of their own selves, and even their own sense of selves: 'I couldn't see anything. I couldn't see myself'. We suggest therefore that *experience of absence* may be an important, encompassing aspect of loneliness, and that this may well include, but extend beyond, prior accounts of the absence of 'social goods' in

loneliness (e.g. see Roberts & Krueger, 2021) to implicate absented aspects of self-experience itself.

4.2 What are our main claims about loneliness?

The participants in our study have expressed their experiences of disconnection and absence as impediments to fully experiencing themselves.

4.3 In loneliness, we experience a connection between the experience of absence, and the disruption of self-experience

The connection between the experience of absence and disruption of self-experience revealed itself in the analysis in different ways and in different degrees. Some of the participants expressed this disruption explicitly: '[Lonely] people were just looking for someone to help them to experience…whether it was joy, peace, love…' These participants expressed the impossibility of undergoing specific experiences unless this experience is being 'witnessed' by others. Other participants expressed not the impossibility of having an experience, but an acute awareness of the absence of the Other's perspective, as part of their experiencing: 'When you grieve, and nobody looks at your grief.' Furthermore, participants also talked about not being able to see themselves as part of their experiences of loneliness. There is some resonance here too, with another phenomenological qualitative study (Guts et al., 2016), which focuses on intimacy, but also reaches the conclusion that connection is so important to us because it affords possibilities for the self and the future.

Our participants' experiences relate closely to some ideas developed by Jean Paul Sartre. Throughout his work Sartre offers different descriptions of how different absences affected his experience. His views on the dynamics of our relationship with the Other are particularly relevant to our discussion of loneliness. He says: "A man evaporates without an eye-witness" (1962, p. 168). When describing what happens in another social experience (shame), Sartre argues that the Other is an indispensable mediator between myself and me. In our participants' accounts, this appears to be the case. Loneliness seems to be at a different level than shame or other emotions, however, in the sense that it may even block the possibility of experiencing them: '[Lonely] people were just looking for someone to help them to experience… whether it was joy, peace, love…'.

This disruption of self-experience that we are referring to is clearly different from the philosophical awareness of aloneness or disconnection that Moustakas refers to when he describes existential loneliness.

4.4 Loneliness arises in discrepancy and incongruence

Another key characteristic of loneliness is that it is often experienced even when surrounded by others. The experience includes a sense of discrepancy, of disconnection and contrast. This common contextual, cultural understanding of 'loneliness' is reflected in literature (theoretical and experiential) which refers to a disconnection

between what there is 'outside' and what the person feels 'inside' (as in the paradoxes summarised by Achterbergh et al, 2020, for example). In our own study we found expressions such as: "I was on my own. I mean in my heart. The place was full. There were hundreds of people living about." However, our participants also referred to other sorts of contrasting experiences, beyond the social-relational domain ("I would endure this beauty and this pain"). A close look at the intentionality of the experience of loneliness may provide a more comprehensive account of this contrast. We find the distinction between objective and subjective poles of experience illuminating here. In his studies on the phenomenology of vision and touch, Katz (1989) distinguished these two poles. These reflect whether the attention is directed to the proximal stimulus or projected to the object 'out there'. Statements where the attention is directed to a distant object projected 'out there' ("I feel a pointed object out there") correspond to the objective pole of intentionality, whereas statements where the attention is directed to the proximal stimulus ("I feel a prickling sensation") correspond to the subjective pole of intentionality. We can extend this distinction between poles of intentionality to illuminate the incongruence from which loneliness arises. If we consider the intentionality of our respondents' accounts of loneliness, we can see a third person evaluative perspective of one's own relationship with the world. This is an evaluation where the person reveals a disconnection between how they feel ('I was on my own') and what they see out there ('The place was full'). We may call this a disconnection between the objective and subjective poles of intentionality.

4.5 Absence-in-presence distinguishes loneliness from other experiences that involve absence, such as social isolation

We have seen that loss and disconnection are experienced even when surrounded by others. This is one of the most striking characteristics of loneliness and what distinguishes loneliness from other experiences such as social isolation. One may say that it seems obvious that people do not need to connect with *everyone* around them, and another may counter that they do need to connect with *someone*. This paradox is familiar, but a sense of incongruence is an important aspect of someone's experience of loneliness. The experience of absence of self and the disconnection between poles of intentionality seem to converge here, to illuminate the experience of feeling lonely even when around others.

4.6 Further reflections on the use of IPA

We have analysed data which involve both pre-reflective and reflective content. IPA's primary focus is very often turned towards reflective content, but by engaging with imagery, tone, metaphor, the tacit can often be explored, and may be foregrounded. Through engagement with the narratives produced by study respondents, IPA researchers often use 'material' as data which is very similar to that used in other 'Big Q' approaches. We take the view that some experiences—generally those which are of some existential significance—might be best and most fully articulated and understood

via such personal narrative accounts. IPA employs a mode of interviewing that elicits such accounts, and its analysis then proceeds by decoding the structure of the participant's narrative. In doing analysis, we are effectively identifying the components of that structure, through a phenomenological lens: first the objects of concern, then experiential statements which capture the participant's relation to those objects, and finally developing more fully articulated interpretations of the relationship between the person and their world in the form of thematic structures. These thematic structures tend to describe the *meaning* of what is known (as in our example here), rather than the *how* of coming to know—though there are exceptions (e.g. see Meneses & Larkin, 2015, or Rhodes et al., 2019). Other phenomenologically-informed approaches may balance their commitments and draw on their key sources in different combinations to achieve a different focus but in our view, this heterogeneity is a healthy and positive feature (providing a repertoire of choices for the researcher), provided that there are good faith attempts to understand the different origins and commitments of contrasting approaches (see Halling, 2020).

The IPA researcher does the work with knowledge and skills. Some of these skills are to do with knowing how to work with these kinds of data and processes—knowing how to conduct interviews, or when to consolidate analytic work, or when to focus in on detail, or when to discuss interpretations with others, for example. There is an extensive methods literature wich supports the devvelopment of these skills for IPA researchers (some of which we've cited in the opening sections of this paper), but it also important to note that there is a community of practice, too. Communities of practice (such as those which have thrived for IPA in online discussion fora, and 'real world' peer support groups) play an important role in fostering understanding of the distncitive commitments of an approach, the distinctive features of the best work, and the common challenges experienced in conducting research.

Contextual knowledge is also important. For example, in this study it was useful to have previous knowledge of some religious symbols and of their meaning in order to be able to put them in the right relations to other expressions that were used. In this sense, epoche is not a good fit with IPA, and is replaced with an explicit acknowledgement by the researcher of all the previous (implicit) knowledge the researcher will be employing. The objective is not to rid oneself of this knowledge, it is rather to acknowledge it, and to use it knowingly. Like many 'Big Q' approaches, in IPA, good analysis relies on the creativity and insight of the researcher. It is important to acknowledge that the meanings discussed in IPA accounts arise through this intersubjective work, first as direct exploration with the respondent (the open ended question of an interview) and subsequent analysis. IPA writing has often referred to this as the 'double hermeneutic' (Smith et al., 2009), but the idea of a social-relational dimension for phenomenologically-informed work is by no means limited to IPA, or to qualitative approaches (e.g. see Gallagher, 2007).

5 Summary

Loneliness involves disruptions of the self and self-knowledge. Social relationships and the presence of others—as well as other characteristics in a given environment—provide important collaborative resources needed to develop aspects of the self (e.g., a sense of recognition and self-worth; character traits like compassion and forms of emotional expression) and self-knowledge. In loneliness the experience of absence is related to a disruption of self because our way of being in the world is co-determined in its meaning by our capacity to experience different aspects of ourselves via our interactions with others, and the situations in which we find ourselves in the world. When our perception of this situation is affected by different changes in the environment, this has a direct impact on our own possibilities of being. The absence experienced in loneliness and the consequential disruption of self is directly connected to instances in which specific aspects of the self cannot be displayed in the world or communicated to others. The *experience of absence* thus extends beyond prior accounts of the absence of 'social goods' to implicate absented aspects of self-experience itself.

IPA sees itself – as the name indicates – as an intepretative phenomenological approach. It is *phenomenological* because it is concerned with understanding people's relationship to the things which matter to them, the phenomena which constitute their lived world. In drawing out and naming the meanings which best capture these *orientations toward the world*, IPA researchers and their respondents are both involved in forms of *interpretation*. IPA's commitment to an idiographic level of analysis means that it treats context and variability as an important part of topic, and as its interpretative remit, rather than as issues to be transcended, or 'closed out'. Thus, discussion of themes in IPA typically reflects upon both convergence and divergence. Reporting upon the results of this work aims to foreground the insights *from those data*, as we have tried to do here.

A wide literature exists to support further IPA research. As noted in the introduction, it provides reflections on key concepts from phenomenology and hermeneutics and core methodological practices. It also covers developing connections to the fields of embodied and enactive cognition (Larkin et al., 2011; Gunn & Larkin, 2020), illustrations of how IPA can be used alongside the development and evaluation of interventions (e.g. see Hudson et al., 2015), and methodological innovation (see the recent collection of papers edited by Smith & Eatough, 2019). Having worked together on this project as an interdisciplinary team (philosopher; psychologist), we are excited by the further opportunities afforded in these latter developments, which involve innovations in design (multiple perspective samples), data collection (combining visual and verbal material), and analysis (drawing out connections between IPA and other analytic approaches). We encourage researchers with context-sensitive questions about the meaning of events, relationships or processes to engage with this literature, and to consider IPA as an approach which can be helpful to them.

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Declarations

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