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Refugees' Experience of Loneliness as Disrupting "*Be-ing-Becoming*"

Linda Finlay and Divine Charura

1 Introduction

To be lonely, says Dahlberg, is "to be rejected, excluded, forgotten, abandoned, unwanted or unnecessary" (Dahlberg 2007, 198). Loneliness involves a loss of contact and disconnection: from ourselves, others, and from the world. Fractured connections and sense of not belonging coalesce in a lack of participation in a world where one's "relationship with existence itself is shattered" (Greening 1990, 323).

It is evident to the two of us, on the basis of both our personal and professional experience, that loneliness is particularly prevalent in refugee communities. Confronted by multiple losses and high levels of daily uncertainty (precarity), refugees are particularly vulnerable to mental health problems, whether linked to pre-migration experiences such as war and trauma or to dire post-migration conditions (poverty, poor housing, separation from families, and insecure immigration status)¹ (O'Brien & Charura 2023; Taylor et al. 2024).

The pervasive trauma characteristic of the refugee experience is amplified by individuals' multiple life losses, institutionalized racism, the strangeness of their new environment, the degrading hostility they encounter and the barriers they face. As Stolorow (2011) notes, the essential features of trauma are (a) its context embeddedness, where the trauma cannot be held and integrated, and (b) its existential significance, where we are forced to confront our finitude. All these processes leave the refugees raw and vulnerable, and heighten the risk of loneliness (Christodoulou 2014).

As psychotherapists, we share an interest in what enables effective therapy with refugees. We are particularly curious as to whether their experience of loneliness is distinctive or simply part of the spectrum of human experience.

Arguing for the former, Maguire (2023, 47) contends that refugees experience a “particular and peculiar” version of loneliness, one that often involves “a lack of recognition, of being without status or documents, of indefiniteness, of lives lived precariously or in poverty.” In such a situation, offers of official sanctuary may involve a “structural enforcement of loneliness.” Here, Maguire is pointing to the systemic context that exacerbates loneliness and results in a vicious cycle of isolation and ill health. We agree that refugees’ personal experience must be politically situated.

This chapter focuses on how hyper-precarious social dislocation, and the trauma of being a refugee, can lead to fractured identities which compromise their present and future being. There is a reduction of self in the face of impoverished social environments.

We start with a *literature review* of key psychological research and then explicate our empirical *findings from interviews* with five refugees (this study is part of a broader psychological research project on the experiences of sanctuary seekers and implications for healing integration and therapy). The discussion section brings the two phases of research together, highlighting two overarching concepts of “lost-lossness of not-belonging” and “Be-ing-Becoming.”

2 Literature Review

Loneliness is commonly defined in the psychological literature as the absence of others, whether in the form of intimate personal connections, social interactions and/or collective (community identity) relationships. It can be understood as subjective feelings of disconnection (feeling separate, misunderstood) in response to lost or desired meaningful connections and involves clusters of competing, ambivalent emotions (Bound Alberti 2018).

Importantly, the perceived absence of experiences and roles may result in a disruption of *self*-experience (Motta 2023, 1151): “The absence experienced in loneliness and the consequential disruption of self is directly connected to instances in which specific aspects of self cannot be displayed in the world or communicated to others.”

Similarly, Motta and Larkin’s (2022) interpretive phenomenological study of loneliness and solitude highlights how the different dimensions of self can be affected. The experience of absence is related to parts of self that are “absented,” leading to a profound disruption—even *fragmentation*—of an individual’s experience of self.

Pursuing a focus on identity, Morgan and Burholt (2020) engaged narrative interviews with eleven older people. Their findings showed how participants experienced losses and loneliness as "*biographical disruption*" (Bury 1982): a shift in self-perception where taken-for-granted assumptions are challenged and anticipated futures are called into question. Here, individuals become aware of a troubling dissonance between their past and present selves, with consequences for both their personal and social identities. Transitioning out of loneliness, the researchers suggest, involves the reworking and reconstruction of valued identities.

In response to limited attempts to draw together the subjective and idiosyncratic experience of loneliness, McKenna-Plumley et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of relevant qualitative research. On the basis of a thematic synthesis of twenty-nine studies, they elicited three overarching themes to capture the multifaceted nature of the experience:

1. Loneliness is both psychological and contextual;
2. Loneliness centers on feelings of meaningful connection and painful disconnection;
3. Loneliness can exist in a general, pervasive sense or can relate to deficits in specific relationships.

The researchers concluded that loneliness involves an aversive, harmful psychological experience of disconnection linked to physical, personal, *and* sociopolitical contexts.

3 Loneliness among Refugees

Psychological research supports the view that, for refugees, social dislocation and trauma can result in fractured identities and difficulties in reconciling past and present lives. Studies, such as Fino et al. (2020), have shown that refugees suffer elevated rates of psychological disorders and post-traumatic stress. Interpersonal trauma has been found to result in avoidant attachment styles which compromise individuals' ability to seek/receive help while undermining their future attachment possibilities (Morina et al. 2016).

Loneliness and isolation are often cited as particular challenges faced by refugees. In 2014, an organization working with migrants and refugees in London conducted a survey whose findings were published in the report "This

Is How It Feels to Be Lonely” (Christodoulou 2014). The research showed that 58 per cent of respondents regarded loneliness as the *biggest* single challenge facing refugees and migrants in the UK. In tandem with the loss of relationships, identity, work, and status (often seen as consequences of racism and xenophobia), refugees found themselves caught in a “vicious circle ... leading them to more isolation and loneliness and further damaging their health” (2014, 6).

Hart’s (2023) phenomenological research on experiences of ten refugees from Africa and the Middle East who sought asylum in the UK sheds light on how lack of meaningful daily occupation fuels the sense of “liminality” and “precarity” created by systemic structures and government policies. “Occupational constancy” across one’s lifespan is seen as a route to repair and healing with meaningful occupations anchoring individuals during upheavals and transitions, and also aiding the process of creating possible imagined futures.

Vidal et al. (2023) studied data from semi-structured interviews with fifty-one refugees/asylum-seekers in Scotland concerning experiences of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their pressures emerged as more acute than those suffered by the general population. Isolation tended to reignite the pain of earlier losses while reinforcing feelings of hopelessness and lack of control. Employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the researchers highlight themes of “rupture” and “liminality,” underlining how societal restrictions amplified an already disjointed life course trajectory (Vidal et al. 2023).

Other psychological and geographical studies have moved beyond a focus on the individual (personality, resources, demographics) to explore the role of communities and societal relationships (Wong et al. 2017). Highlighting the growth in international migration in an increasingly globalized world, Lewis et al. (2015) argue that many migrants routinely experience exclusion and exploitation, resulting in “*hyper-precarious*” lives.

In their research, Vang et al. (2023) explored loneliness among an aging refugee group in the United States, highlighting the importance of employing an intersectional lens that also recognizes variability resulting from different experiences through pre-immigration, displacement, and post-immigration phases.

Taking an explicitly political line, historian Maguire (2023) argues that refugee’s loneliness is created by racism and serves a useful function for states intent on constructing borders by reinforcing policies that restrict entitlements to welfare services and exclude refugees from employment and housing. Loneliness is thus seen as structurally enforced. This resonates with the decolonial work of Mayblin (2020), who argues that asylum policy rooted in impoverishment amounts to “slow violence.”

Our research takes these findings as a starting point recognizing how individual elements intertwine with structural forces. Loneliness arises, as Ratcliffe (2023) argues, when we are unable to access certain kinds of (inter) personal and social possibilities—ones which are conspicuously accessible to others. Here, *feeling* lonely and *being* lonely become subtly intertwined, so that individual (psychological and existential) elements mesh with social, cultural, and structural components. We agree and support the *Ubuntu* notion from African philosophy of the being and becoming of a "We-self" that is located in a wider social system summarized in the phrase "I am—because I belong." Such belonging is compromised in refugee's experience, and we wished to discover more about what this actually means in practice.

4 Methodology

In this pilot study, we have sought to enter into, and interpretively explicate, refugees' tacit lived experience (*Erlebnis*) of loneliness. The focus is on the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*)—the taken-for-granted meaningful subjective-social world. We all have a unique lifeworld, partially shared with others (through language and culture), encompassing embodiment, intersubjectivity, emotional attunement, and lived time/space (Finlay 2011).

Following ethics approval from York St John University, Divine drew on his connections and relationships with local refugee groups and regional services supporting refugees. We approached five refugees who formally consented to take part in this preliminary study. Our call-out for volunteers was facilitated by service organizers who recognized the importance of our research. The information sheet given to participants included details of the aims of the study and the fact that we were both university researchers and therapists (implicitly making the point that we were not from the "authorities," i.e., such as, some government departments that refugees may feel uncomfortable engaging with).

No attempt was made to obtain a representative sample for this pilot study. Four of the participants had recently come to the UK so are being temporarily housed in a hotel. The fifth ("Nagar") was a refugee three decades earlier and is now well integrated into the community. While their stories differed, they had all struggled to establish themselves as "legitimate" through applications to the Home Office.

Pragmatically and randomly dividing up our participants, Divine interviewed a woman ("SB") and a married couple ("Maryam"; "AP"); Linda interviewed one woman ("Nagar") and one man ("Mehrad"). Interviews were semi-structured,

lasting between 30 and 90 minutes. After gaining information about the context of their refugee status, we invited each to describe particular (concrete) “moments of being lonely.” Aware that their English language use might be limited, particularly for the four who had recently arrived in the UK, we invited them to elaborate their descriptions by using metaphors (e.g., objects, colors, and textures) that represented loneliness for them. We attempted to reproduce their way of speaking accurately in the transcripts, i.e., not altering the words except to show omitted words (...) and add clarifying points in brackets []—an approach commonly engaged in psychological qualitative research.

The idiographic approach taken aimed to explore individual perceptions and experience. As psychotherapists, we were mindful of our therapeutic presence, holding a curious, compassionate space of deeply listening in an attuned, mirroring way. We remained hyper-aware of the sensitivity of participants’ disclosures, recognizing that re-telling their stories could re-open old trauma wounds. Our duty of care was to minimize harm to individuals and respect their dignity. For example, we invited participants to share as much (or as little) as they wanted. We also tried to ensure confidentiality/anonymity by removing details that might reveal their identities. The participants chose the pseudonyms (or initials) they wanted to be known by.

Our ethical commitment also included offering a debrief at the end of the interviews and opportunities to speak with us again if needed. Service organizers were available to continue to offer psychological and social support.

Our analytic process was guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2021) recursive six-phase framework for conducting Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). Adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological orientation in both our data collection and analysis, we relied on our embodied resonances and intuitive sensings as we sought to open ourselves to deeper meanings within the participants’ descriptions (Finlay 2005).

We began by immersing ourselves in the participants’ stories, dwelling with the five transcripts individually. We made no assumptions as to whether participants shared particular experiences and sought instead to understand their particular, idiographic meanings. We then came together to process emergent understandings iteratively identifying key themes which described patterns in the data. Inevitably, our interpretations have played a part in selection of quotations, analysis, and writing up. Throughout the process we were critically self-aware of our role in the knowledge production.

While neither of us has direct experience of being an actual “refugee,” both of us are multi-heritage “immigrants” who arrived in the UK as “foreigners” (Linda

as a white American-British woman who had grown up in India; Divine as a Black British man of African heritage). We both have experienced immigration obstructions, which together with the close relationships we have had with people who have been refugees have helped us to understand issues around being culturally displaced, disconnected, and "othered." Our participants' stories and situations resonated deeply with us as we have also experienced abuses of power and witnessed ways that political structures and institutionalized racism perpetuate othering.

As we reflexively and iteratively shaped our themes, we noted the dynamic nature of being human and how the experience of loneliness seemed not an end point but rather a human experience part of *being-in-the-world*. Our dialogues with one another and with our participants enabled us to philosophize in a cross-cultural way, and this broadened our epistemic horizons (Ojimba 2023). Drawing from his African heritage, Divine shared ideas around the ethics of *Ubuntu* and this became a lens we used to deepen our understandings of the themes.

5 Findings

While each participant's circumstances and experiences differed, three themes emerged common to all:

- Loneliness as disconnected isolation
- Loneliness as precarious (un-)belonging
- Loneliness as compromised Being

Loneliness as Disconnected Isolation

All our participants come from contexts where kinship groups and community-oriented cultures are prized. Here, an individual's selfhood is intertwined with the selves of others. Without others, there is no self. Following severance of these life-affirming connections, loneliness can quickly set in. As SB told us, "You have some baggage, but you have no friends; you have no family and that's it. You are on your own and it's just you ... on your own."

Mehrad underlines the sense of loss: "It's very bad you've lost your friends you were together with for 20 years; you lost your family who saw you when you were born."

He tells of how one night his loneliness became so acute that he found himself leaning over a bridge to gaze at the river, possibly with a view to killing himself. A man then appeared and showed concern:

Mehrad—He says, “Why are you on the bridge” and he is thinking I want to kill myself.

Linda—Had you thought like this? ...

Mehrad—Maybe. ... We talked together and I say “I’m okay.” He say, “Call a friend to come here and you go home.” And I say, “I haven’t any friends.” And he say, “I can’t believe that, you must call someone.” ... I say, “I’m from [country], its ... 2am and everybody is asleep.” ... Anyway, its passed. I think maybe sometimes it happens for us—a point in the topic of loneliness ... in the top of sad, where hope is lost, we must be strong, and everything is going.

In *Farsi*, the word loneliness means a deprivation of connection, a loss of overlapping family/community circles which results in a demeaning, pitiable isolation. For Nagar and Mehrad, this Farsi definition is a potent source of imagery. Nagar describes seeing herself as a “gnarled, sort of scared, lonely tree” with nothing around it, just on its own surviving in “dry, dry earth,” with little nourishment. There are no shared roots; people just pass it by. Mehrad, too, sees himself as a lone tree set in a desert landscape. However, in his case he also identifies some green shoots which perhaps suggest some hope of growth and nourishment. For both participants, the metaphor of a parched tree underlines their sense of being cut off from relational nourishment.

Maryam similarly acutely feels the loss of her family. She worries that if something happened to them or herself, she would not be able to be with them:

I told you it is bitter. And it is not a good situation It’s our new year in two weeks ... definitely I will feel loneliness in that time because all the family gets together and celebrates the new year. ... I think is something happens to me or to my family and how can I go and be with them? I can’t go. And if something bad happened to me here, who is beside me?

However, Maryam has now made some friends through her church and volunteering work, and this has made her feel less lonely. Loneliness mainly erupts and threatens her when she stops being busy and is alone at night. At these dark points she feels she will mentally die, losing both hope and any sense of a future. She resolves to not look back at what she has lost, and remain focused on moving forward:

Gradually I become friends with them and ..., once I felt I am part of them, and I am a volunteer. ... I'm very busy from morning to night. ... I'll make myself busy with it but in the holidays one day if I sit in the room then the loneliness is back. ... It's something dark like, like a woman in a dark clothes sitting in the corner of the room and just looking at me. ... I don't look back on me just look forward because I'm afraid to look [at] the background of my life ... because I know if I turn my head back the loneliness will come. And it will stop me. ... When I don't have work to do and it's holiday and I think about many things, you know, fears, loneliness, future, what will happen?

Maryam shows how hard she is working to construct a meaningful identity in the face of considerable "biographical disruption" (Bury 1982). But as she cuts off from her past self, determinedly focusing on her creating a future, her current life trajectory remains insecure.

Maryam's husband, AP, tells of his "bad feeling" of loneliness when he is unable to truly communicate and is left with silence:

We don't have any family here. We don't have any friends here. Some [from her country] ..., we can see them, but they don't have, they don't, they're not our friends. I need good friends for speaking, for relationship, for, um, everything.

SB, in contrast, stays connected with her family, with whom she is still in touch via social media. While she is slowly developing friendships in her new church group, she remains sad that she cannot "hug" her family or fully share her experience with them:

When we are going to church ..., they are very kindly; and I think they're like my family here and when I go to church, I am feeling better. ... I don't have any loneliness feeling and it's very good. But when I am alone and in [my] room ... I feel alone a lot. Yes, and I can't speak to anyone. Yes, it's very horrible. ... When I am feeling sad or feeling bad or feeling lonely, I do [not] know why but I am laughing, I'm saving my face ... when I'm talking with my mom or with my family. ... They do not know what happened here for us, and I can't talk about it. It's really, really bad.

All five participants yearn for a familiar community and experience emptiness through being detached from one. This can lead them to seek comfort and recognition from others from their country of origin. Both Nagar and Maryam talk about gravitating toward people like themselves to reduce their loneliness.

Maryam relates her loneliness to a lack of a neighborhood community gathering around food. In the following extract, she expresses her yearning

for collective cultural practices surrounding food and the physical and soulful nourishment these offer:

Maryam—In your loneliness you would miss your food or sometimes your street, sometimes for your neighbors.

Divine—In the loneliness you begin to long for different things [like] your community, that you belong, to the food [in] the streets.

Maryam—When I decided to save myself from loneliness, I decided to find a ... friend [from her country] in the hotel. ... One of them had just left her husband [behind] ... and just moved here with her daughter and ... another had moved here without her husband and her little son. ... I helped them and now I think I saved them a little bit ... because we get together and they make traditional food ... We make the bread, because we couldn't eat ... the bread here because ... the bread is not nice. We wanted our bread. ... I think about the food, and it makes us calm. ... When we see the food that is from [country], ... we get happy with that.

Nagar describes how strange she finds it when she is invited to take a cup of tea/coffee and then asked whether she wants milk and sugar. In ... [her country], she says, you would invite guests to make their own:

I remember this feeling very strange for me, because that's not ... how you meet other people's needs in [her country of origin]. ... I remember suddenly thinking, I want [someone from her country] so I can say this to them. I wanted somebody to say, "Is this ... peculiar or is this how they do it?"

Loneliness as Precarious (Un-)belonging

All the participants expressed feeling diminished by their precariously demeaning circumstances, such as not being allowed to find employment or access secure housing. In the absence of productive roles, they feel restricted and reduced, denied positive identities and projects which enable feelings of belonging. Confronting the uncertainties of refugee status as well as the suspicious, objectifying gaze of the other, their sense of self is disrupted. The insecurity of their situation fuels their loneliness.²

Beyond the explicit "liminality and precarity" (Hart 2023) of their refugee status/situation, they are uncertain about where, and with whom, they might belong. Four of the participants, for example, were being housed in anonymous hotel rooms, separated from neighbors by language barriers. There is an absence of another who validates, who understands, who knows them, and who offers

recognition and affirmation that they belong. Nagar feels herself to be an alien in an alien land: "With no family or landscapes to orientate myself. ... If you don't catch an echo, it's near madness."

For all the participants, loneliness lessens when there is work to keep them busy, things to do, or people to connect with. For both AP and Mehrad, not being able to work not only leaves their days empty and meaningless but also compromises their masculinity As AP says:

We in a bad situation at this time. I have permission for work and she [wife] has permission for work but really we can't do anything. ... If we go ... for a walk we can't do anything. They give us maybe ... for a few hours £6 and this is not very good. [Becomes tearful] It's a bad situation for us really.

Left with nothing to define him, Mehrad feels in limbo:

Linda—So do you think there is something more to being a refugee or coming to a new country ... more ... than is normal for everybody?

Mehrad—Yes. Because we lost everything, we lost our past, we lost our money, we lost our goals in future.

Linda—Your identity?

Mehrad—Yes, and it's very hard. It's very hard because you lost everything, your past and your future and we don't know what has happened or what is happening. ... I think men can't speak together about emotions; you can't speak to other men about your feelings.

Linda—Right. So even more, you need to be strong.

Mehrad—Yes, every time your friend that is a man calls to you, ..., they say "are you ok?" but you say "yes bro, I am fine." You can't say to your friend (that is not a boy or a female), the men can't.

Identity, sense of purpose, freedom, and belonging: are all compromised as Maryam notes:

In the law and in the paper that Home Office gave us, there was something that says you ... are free but actually you're not. ... We don't feel free. ... When you're free you can go around the world ... you can make decisions for yourself.

In Nagar's case, her "light blue passport" granted her a special status and rights as a refugee and confirmed that she was under protection of the United Nations. Even so, she was treated with suspicion. When she married a British man, officialdom—both French and British—remained suspicious. Her UN passport then expired, and it took three more years for her to get a British passport:

Nagar—Every time the blue passport came out of the pocket, they would stop and question me.

Linda—Suspiciously question you?

Nagar—Yes. So, it was a passport with which we could travel but it was sometimes even not known by officials that it was legitimate. ... When we decided to marry ... the French wouldn't renew my blue passport because I was married. The British wouldn't accept me. I would arrive back and there were people in suits from the Home Office coming to see if we were telling the truth about our marriage. ... inspecting our house. So there was a three year of wilderness whereby I couldn't use the blue one ... and I didn't have the deep blue one from Britain. ... That was very precarious.

Even after receiving the security of a British passport, Nagar still didn't feel she belonged. She still confronts suspicion and feels unseen and misunderstood. Here, she describes a disorientating moment during a diploma course she began eight years after becoming a British resident. She had made a cake for the group, and heard someone say: "Oh, she wants to be like." She was shaken by this misinterpretation of her behavior, which rocked her sense of self:

Nagar—I really, really felt almost kicked and it did something to my sense of being: that I must operate differently, but I didn't know what that differently was.

Linda—So it was quite an alienating comment.

Nagar—And it unleashed something within me. I had been confident, more confident in my way of being. I felt I knew what kindness, what generosity, is.

Linda—So everything was turned upside down, you then didn't know who these people were and what they thought and about you(?) All your certainties about your way of being had gone(?)

Nagar—Yes. ... If I explain better then maybe the misunderstanding will go.

Nagar's sense of being mis-recognized, amplified by a fellow student's shaming, demeaning, othering comment challenged her previously taken-for-granted certainties, rooted in familiar cultural practices. She was left feeling confused, disorientated, and alienated.

Loneliness as Compromised Being

Timotijevic and Breakwell (2000) discuss the threats to identity experienced by migrants subject to far-reaching sociopolitical upheaval. Similarly, Ballantyne et al. (2021) examine the concept of being "lost in transition" and

how post-migration experiences result in ongoing processes of identity change. For the refugee, there is a profound fracturing of self and displacement of old identities while any future identity has yet to take shape. There is uncertainty about who one is and how one should be.

For refugees, not being seen, being mis-recognized and not belonging are painful reminders of the loss/trauma within their experienced disconnection. But that leaves the refugee with a dilemma. How much should they try to belong? To what extent can they be, and share, themselves? Or must they withdraw, subdue, and silence themselves? Every choice seems to compromise their very Being, compounding their loneliness.

Mehrad struggles with his inability to talk about his experience of being a refugee. His grief and lack of trust in others keep him silent and prevent him from connecting with others. He feels unable to share his truth. But his silence makes the loneliness worse and widens the gap he feels between himself and others:

Mehrad—You can't talk about our being refugee with anybody, my family, my friends, no. They think we are going to university and are students. But if you say refugee, they can't understand you and you feel shame that you can't say. In our hotel some people are from [own country of origin] ... or are from everywhere, but you can't say [anything] to them because you don't know who he is, who is she is.

Linda—There could be some problem.

Mehrad—It's problem, and you can't trust.

Linda—So you have to stay silent?

Mehrad—Yes.

Linda—And I'm thinking this silence makes the loneliness worse.

Mehrad—Yes.

Loneliness becomes particularly problematic when a refugee makes efforts to fit in but is still not really seen. Refugees therefore face a dilemma: They can opt to reduce their isolation by undertaking the hard emotional labor involved in striving to fit in; but by doing so, they experience the pain of being forced to reduce and silence themselves. When they do this, others don't see them at all, which leads to a deepening of their loneliness and sense of shame. If they hold onto their truth and try to share more deeply, they are "othered," even rejected. This in turn reinforces feelings of disconnection and unbelonging.

Nagar articulates this dilemma when she ponders the compromises she might need to make to feel less lonely. Should she stay silent so as to pass as

one of the group? Or should she express her own truth, which makes others feel uncomfortable—prompting further rejection? Neither choice promises an escape from loneliness:

I didn't know which to choose—could I bear the loneliness that I felt and not try and raise it so that I can belong to this group, so that some understanding can envelop me? ... I think the shame [long pause] comes from moments when I could feel the discomfort I created. I couldn't not do it, I could see very well what I was doing, could see very well the discomfort. ... Ironically it makes you more lonely. ... I can pretend that I don't have the experiences as I have and reduce my sense of isolation. ...

My insistence upon defining myself as a “refugee” is also that I want it to be known that I am a “courageous woman.” We took a lot of risks and [are] not to be pitied. I've never said I am a refugee ... [in the] sense of wanting sympathy. It's always felt like a sense of defiance that we made a stance.

Here, Nagar is describing how her attempts to fit in leave her feeling unseen; she wants to be recognized and seen in her distinctiveness and difference. However, that makes others feel uncomfortable and “other” her. She is pulled to withdraw and isolate herself to protect herself against the emotional/social hostility she senses from others. Both options—fitting in or showing difference—seem to result in pain, shame, and loneliness.

For Nagar, having her difference acknowledged in a contextualized way, so that others can see her more fully, offers the best way out of loneliness. She wants to be seen not simply in terms of her trauma, shame, and loss but also in her courage, strength, generosity, and determination. While she recognizes that her agency includes being able to educate others and connect in other ways, she finds it exhausting to have to work so hard.

6 Discussion

The three interconnected themes developed above, around “disconnection,” “un-belonging,” and “compromised Being,” underline how relational-social disconnection leads to ruptures between past and present selves and compromise refugees' way of being now and in the future. Should they find a new way of being in order to fit in? How can they create a meaningful life and sense of self?

Two overarching concepts are highlighted across the literature review and our interviews: *Lost-lossness of Not-belonging*; and “*Be-ing-Becoming*.”

Lost-lossness of Not-belonging

Of particular significance is the way refugees struggle with not-belonging given the loss of affirming, nourishing, supportive communities which once reinforced their sense of identity. As familiar horizons recede, so too does a grounded sense of self (Motta 2023). For individuals cut off from orientating relationships and routines, there is an affective collapse of subjective meaning structures (Aho 2023). This links to Bury's (1982) notion of "biographical disruption": where major life events can constitute a "destructive breach in the fabric of life," with damaging personal and interpersonal consequences (Locock et al. 2009, 1045). Their state of *non-identity*—of not-belonging or being fully recognized and represented—leads to a precarious sense of identity within a life that itself is hyper-precarious (Lewis et al. 2015).

Hart (2023, 3) highlights "multiple points of rupture in the refugees" life and biography, which create the loss of their old self. Loss and disorientation also feature in research by Ballantyne et al. (2021), which explores how post-migration experiences can result in ongoing processes of identity change and being "lost in transition."

Our interview findings concur. Disruptions of social relationships, meaningful occupation, and the ability to mobilize material resources, all impact on emerging self-identities. Further, we suggest that refugees face a particularly damaging disruption in not-belonging when previously taken-for-granted ways of being are challenged when they are mis-recognized and othered. Such biographical disruption forces individuals to rethink their way of being to keep safe while they search for *meaningful* identities that have coherence, purpose and significance (Reker & Wong 1988; Martela & Steger 2016).

Following Roberts and Krueger (2021), we agree that loneliness arises when needs for intimacy, affection, validation—i.e., desired social goods—are not met which impacts their ability to realize themselves. But more than a simple absence of social goods seems to apply here. We would highlight the relevance of lifeworldly horizons of loss, grief, trauma, and shame, even when these are not explicitly acknowledged. That the world does not feel a safe, nourishing space understandably leads a refugee to withdraw, physically, emotionally, socially, and in silence. But this only promotes the isolation and disconnection which feeds the loneliness.

With our more critical phenomenological perspective, we agree with Maguire (2023) that refugees' experience is a distinct version of loneliness given their traumatic histories and hyper-precarious lives exacerbated by politico-structural

enforcement of isolation. The “not belonging” of loneliness, says Arendt (1958), is “among the most radical and desperate experiences of man” (475). When our sense of self is destabilized, our capacity for thought (e.g., ability to judge one’s own self-interest) and collective action are undermined, fueling the growth of totalitarianism where structures are seen to perpetuate the fear and separation that keep people lonely.

Sagan (2023) extends this argument highlighting Arendt’s notion of state organized loneliness to increase the docility of citizens through cutting people off from connection and the impoverishment of their common worlds. She argues against locating the etiology and management of loneliness within the individual. While such theorizing is beyond the scope of this chapter, we agree that lived experience is always culturally and politically contingent and that therapeutic interventions must acknowledge this relational-social context.

“Be-ing-Becoming”

All the refugees in our study yearn for safe spaces/places that involve connecting with others whom they trust (support groups, shared meals, or other culturally familiar group practices) in order to affirm their sense of self. Beyond owning labels such as “refugee,” they want to be seen as human beings with rich personal and cultural histories. In other words, they need to be recognized in their fuller past-present-future being—their *Be-ing-Becoming*. We have borrowed Ramose’s (1999) notion of “*be-ing-becoming*,” using the extra hyphen to distinguish it from the traditional concept of “being and becoming.”

Applying this in our analysis overall, we have come to see loneliness as be-ing “(a) lone” (i.e., separate) individual while in the “*ubu*” (whole-ness) context of an interconnected system. When known this way, they are relieved of the need to engage as much emotional labor to be seen, understood, and appreciated. But in their new host country, the emotional labor of trying to communicate and fit in is unrelenting, and often compounded by a lack of fluent English. This constrains refugees’ ability to explain themselves, undermining their ability to hold onto a valued sense of self.

Ubuntu ontology—a formulation rooted in African reality—designates a reconstruction of reality through the framework of motion and becoming (Ramose 2002). Here, a person’s reality and emergence are represented as a continuous flow of the stream of existence and as a kind of dynamic fluid existence of a We-Self (cf. Agada 2021, 9; Ramose 1999; Medlock & Charura 2024). The self is understood as an *inter*-dependent unit of the social system

where "becoming" involves constant responsive motion. Here, *Ubuntu* emphasizes collectivity over individuality, the interconnectedness of human beings, and communal relationality (Mugumbate & Chereni 2019). Reality rests on interdependency, complementarity, mutuality, and wholeness (Ramose 1999; Charura & Medlock 2024).

Contradicting the Cartesian dictum which posits "I think therefore I am," *Ubuntu* maintains that "I am—because I belong." Implied here is the notion that one's uniqueness as a human-being-on-earth is determined by the quality of the humanity one extends to others, the quality of relationships, and an ongoing process of emergence (Medlock & Charura 2024). The concept is captured by the Zulu saying, "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*": "*a person is a person only through other persons.*"

Bhengu (1996) highlights how *Ubuntu* embodies the humanistic practice of treating all people with respect, humanity and dignity. This encompasses values of sharing and universal "humane-hood," together with respect for other beings and the sacredness of their lifelong process and emergence (Bhengu 1996). For Mndende (2006), too, *Ubuntu* "means showing respect and empathy for human beings and helping those who are physically, emotionally, socially or spiritually in need."

The *Ubuntu* concept of "I am—because I belong" is particularly pertinent to our evolving themes of refugee loneliness as "disconnection," "un-belonging," and "compromised Being." That our participants expressed distress at regularly being mis-recognized and reminded of "not belonging" is significant, highlighting their profound alienation.

Such understandings offer a direction for healing and support in the future. The loneliness of our participants would certainly be eased by more opportunities to be more fully recognized, to connect, and to belong-with others. While core principles of therapy currently value relational encounters and social justice, further research is needed to examine how *Ubuntu* might be specifically applied in practice. How might therapists work with solitary refugees who have lost their self and their worldly belonging? How can a valued sense of self—now and in the future—be nurtured? Such work, we posit, starts with cultural humility and not privileging Eurocentric theories and methods. This involves an "ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented ... in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the[m]" (Hook 2013).

The methodological integrity of any qualitative inquiry rests on two composite processes: (i) fidelity to the subject matter and (ii) utility in achieving goals (Levitt et al. 2017). We hope both processes can be discerned in our account. We have striven to capture participants' experiences by using a form of

prose that is compelling, accurate, rich, and resonant account while also citing relevant literature and our participants' actual words—all criteria specified by Pocklinghorne (1983) toward judging the trustworthiness of phenomenological research. We recognize how our account both draw us closer to, while also distances us from, lived experience. We would argue that any account can only ever be partial, selective, tentative, incomplete, and emergent.

Any commonalities across the different accounts of refugee experience presented (from the literature and our own interviews) are “constructed on the ground of infinite individual lifeworlds which are pregnant with senses and meanings, idiosyncratic and universal” (Hung & Stables 2008, 7). While refugees in general will probably recognize some of the experiences detailed, further attention needs to be given to individuals' specific stories and sanctuary-seeking histories. Specifically, the impact of the particular sociopolitical context of a refugee's host country (including what necessitated their flight) needs to be considered. Refugees need to be understood in the context of their particular life, cultural background, social position, projects, and meanings. Further research that identifies commonalities and differences between refugees and appreciates the impact of varying temporal and spatial contexts is needed. In particular, research is needed on contrasting refugee experiences given their specific cultural (e.g., collectivist versus individualist) backgrounds.

7 Conclusion

Our two-phased study (scoping review and interviews) suggests that relational-social disconnections experienced by refugees lead to feelings of exclusion and rupture between past and present/future selves. In the context of feeling estranged, disconnected, reduced, and demeaned, their loneliness can be viewed as a threat that disrupts their sense of self. A loss of others leads to a loss of self or, at the very least, some damage to self-experience. This process, in turn, compromises the refugees' *Be-ing-Becoming*, complicating their efforts to create a meaningful life and a sense of self, now and in the future.

The impact of grief, shame, and the pervasive, disorientating misrecognitions and exclusions (interpersonal and systemic) experienced by refugees needs to be emphasized and further examined. Rather than approach loneliness as an affective state arising in the individual, we appreciate the *Ubuntu* acknowledgment that *Be-ing-Becoming* is systemically created.

This chapter has highlighted how loneliness is both an individual and structural (societal) issue. Any solutions or therapeutic interventions must

take this context into account and, in particular, consider community level interventions. Further research is needed to examine the impact of the structural enforcement of loneliness while resisting discourses that place loneliness as pathology within the individual.

As refugees labor to support *Be-ing-Becoming* in ways that are valued by both self and others, they require nourishing relationships and projects. They need to be recognized as valuable human beings and as participating community members engaged in meaningful occupation. This has implications both for therapy and for all supportive interventions offered to those seeking sanctuary on shores far from home.

Notes

- 1 Approaches to those seeking sanctuary (refugees and asylum seekers) vary across different countries. In the United Kingdom, many sanctuary seekers report waiting for years for a decision on their application for asylum. It can take many years for those with refugee status (or "leave to remain") before they can obtain naturalization as a British Citizen. When asylum seekers are waiting for the outcome of their case, they receive basic financial support currently (in 2024, £49.18 each week) and accommodation, but they are not allowed to work or rent a property. If the asylum application fails and rights of appeal are exhausted, then the support ends and they are at risk of deportation.
- 2 While refugees supposedly have the same rights as any UK citizen, they are still subject to policies that treat migrants as less deserving of humanity. Such policies were amplified in 2012 by then-Home Secretary Theresa May, who was explicit about making life difficult for those who cannot show the right paperwork: "The aim is to create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants." This hostile environment perpetuates refugee's sense of not-belonging as they, too, are caught in processes of being monitored and refused access to supportive structures.

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