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The Meaning of “Loneliness” for Traumatized Veterans: A Semiotic Investigation of Veterans’ Written Narratives

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Abstract

Loneliness may be a pertinent problem for veterans in the often-traumatic aftermath of war, and while the qualitative nature of this loneliness bears clinical significance, it remains largely uninvestigated. Specifically, while a sole qualitative study suggests that veterans’ loneliness revolves around the notion of being alone with their experiences (i.e., experiential loneliness), no current study examined what “loneliness” as a signifier may mean from the veteran’s perspective. To fill this gap, in the current semiotic investigation, published books written by veterans were located and scrutinized for the terms “lonely,” “loneliness,” “alone,” and “aleness.” The meanings of these terms were derived from the narrative contexts in which they appeared. Four books were found suitable for the current investigation. Analysis confirmed the validity of the experiential loneliness construct, and yielded a stratified experience with multiple nuanced meanings: a) being the only one who feels in a certain way, b) not being understood, c) being unable to communicate the experience, d) having the experience concealed or invisible to others, e) feeling alien and homeless in a civilian world, and f) being alone in coping. Underscoring the difference between the experiences of loneliness revealed in the analysis and other types of loneliness, findings are discussed in the context of clinical and societal implications.

Keywords: Loneliness; Veterans; Trauma; Experiential Loneliness; Narrative; Semiotics

Introduction

For many veterans, loneliness may persist for decades after their participation in combat (Kuwert, Knaevelsrud, & Pietrzak, 2014; Solomon, Bensimon, Greene, Horesh, & Ein-Dor, 2015). Returning veterans face numerous reintegration obstacles, many of which include an array of interpersonal barriers (Sayer et al., 2010). These may ultimately culminate in a sense of loneliness. Nevertheless, there is a notable paucity of loneliness-focused research in this domain. Moreover, researchers have only recently begun to realize and acknowledge that military-related loneliness may have unique features that make it different from the loneliness that is typically found in civilian populations and hence may warrant unique interventions (J. T. Cacioppo et al., 2016). Acknowledging this investigative dearth, the current study sought to investigate veterans’ accounts of their loneliness, so as to identify the features of veterans’ loneliness, and understand its distinct characteristics within the broader phenomenology of war-trauma’s aftermath.

Why Attempt a Qualitative Investigation of Loneliness?

The need for a qualitative investigation of loneliness arises primarily in light of the multifariousness of the loneliness construct. From the very outset of loneliness research, the literature discerned two types of loneliness: *loneliness of emotional isolation*, denoting the lack of an intimate relationship, and *loneliness of social isolation*, wherein loneliness denotes the lack in social connections, such as friends, colleagues, or peers (Weiss, 1973).

However, the loneliness nomenclature has become considerably more diverse since these initial phases of loneliness research. Some scholars, for instance, have addressed *existential loneliness* (e.g., Ettema, Derksen, & Leeuwen, 2010; Mijuskovic, 2012), which may refer to the state of awareness that one faces death alone, or otherwise the experience of being isolated and insignificant in the face of the entire cosmos, or the realization that man's consciousness is inherently and metaphysically isolated from any other consciousness. Situated within the existential tradition, John McGraw (1995) discerns no less than nine forms of loneliness: metaphysical, epistemological, communicative, ontological (intrapersonal), ethical (moral), existential, emotional (eros), social (friendship), cultural and cosmic (p. 46). It therefore transpires that one may be lonely in numerous ways, and apprehending the characteristics of any experience of loneliness must precede any attempt of quantifying it, examining its correlates and underpinnings, and most importantly, treating it.

According to Stein and Tuval-Mashiach (2015b), whenever the term "loneliness" is evoked, it alludes to a subjective (rather than objective) state wherein one feels or perceives oneself as being painfully (rather than neutrally or positively) isolated (Gotesky, 1965). Indeed, social pain and physical pain share common physiological infrastructures (MacDonald & Leary, 2005). And yet one may be isolated in many different ways (e.g., socially, emotionally, existentially, etc.). Moreover, loneliness invariably connotes the deficiency of some relational need(s), which may also vary considerably between different states of loneliness (e.g., love, care, trust, belongingness, approval, companionship, guidance, etc.), and thus give rise to different maladaptive conceptions (e.g., no one loves me, no one cares for me, no one guides me, etc.). Additionally, loneliness invariably occurs within a perceived relationship between the lonely person and an identified Other(s), both of which may vary (e.g., family, friends, community). Loneliness therefore implies a cognitive discrepancy between the relatedness desired and that which is perceived as attained (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). However, this relatedness and the potential discrepancy it harbors are highly context-dependent. Put otherwise, from this perspective, there exists no such thing as a universal and context-free experience of loneliness. Rather, any experience of loneliness is embedded within a relational context and, in part, gains its personal meaning and prominence from it.

The second and more pertinent reason that a qualitative investigation of loneliness in this population is necessary is clinical. The stressors of war are numerous and compound (Nash, 2007), and may result in combat stress injuries of many sorts (e.g., Figley & Nash, 2007). Most conspicuous of these is posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; e.g., Fulton et al., 2015). Mitigating loneliness may be pivotal in this respect. There is a longstanding realization that social support and connectedness play a crucial role in recovery from trauma (J. L. Herman, 1992). Specifically, trauma research has repeatedly indicated that social support after a traumatic episode is a major protective factor against the development of PTSD (Brewin, Andrews, & Valentine, 2000; Ozer, Best, Lipsey, & Weiss, 2003). However, there is evidence that social support and loneliness are closely related in war's posttraumatic aftermath (Solomon et al., 2015), and that support may be protective only if it manages to alleviate veterans' loneliness (Solomon, Waysman, & Mikulincer, 1990). Indeed, loneliness and social support may be considered as two sides of the same coin; the absence of the latter is likely to be implicated in higher rates of the former (Rook, 1984). This understanding may be crucial when addressing veteran's post-war experiences (e.g., Caplan, 2011; Junger, 2016; Sherman, 2015).

Social support may come in many different forms and its efficacy may be highly dependent on the way it is perceived by its recipients (Knack, Waldrip, & Jensen-Campbell, 2007). Therefore, for the sake of alleviating loneliness, it is imperative to gain a deeper understanding as to what relational provisions are lacking from the recipients' perspective, and accordingly, what support is required and by whom (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Given that loneliness is associated with numerous deleterious health outcomes, as well as suicidal behaviors, depression, and deteriorated psychological well-being

(for a review see S. Cacioppo, Grippo, London, Goossens, & Cacioppo, 2015), understanding and mitigating it is paramount.

The Veteran's Loneliness: Delineating the Gap

To the best of my knowledge, there is only one systematic qualitative investigation that focusses on veterans' loneliness (Stein & Tuval-Mashiach, 2015a). The researchers sought to uncover the attributes of the experience as it is portrayed in testimonial life-stories of Israeli combat veterans and former prisoners of war. Since loneliness is often not acknowledged as such and rarely explicitly admitted by men (Marangoni & Ickes, 1989), the researchers sought themes indicating experiences of painful or undesirable isolation, which they conceptualized as being tantamount to loneliness. Their findings suggest that the veterans in the study felt undesirably alone in the sense that they must bear their traumatic experiences (i.e., war and captivity), as well as posttraumatic experiences (e.g., posttraumatic stress symptoms, depression, reintegration problems, etc.) on their own. The researchers suggest that the concept of *experiential loneliness* (p. 127) may therefore best capture the veteran's loneliness.

Critically examining Stein & Tuval-Mashiach's (2015a) study, one discovers that it is limited in a very crucial sense. The narratives presented in the study did not include any explicit statements of "loneliness" or "aleness," save for one narrative excerpt wherein the participant spoke explicitly of being lonely (see Stein & Tuval-Mashiach, 2015a, p. 128). It therefore transpires that the loneliness in the study was primarily the researchers' construction of the experiences rather than that of the participants. The question then remains, what do traumatized veterans mean when explicitly indicating their own loneliness? More specifically, when veterans construct their own experiences as loneliness, do these experiences correspond with experiential loneliness or do they relate to altogether different forms of loneliness? These questions are semiotic in nature and are the focus of the current study.

Semiotics and the Study of Loneliness

Traced back to the philosophical writings of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) and Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), semiotics is the study of signs and the manner in which signifiers, typically but not exclusively words, relate to that which they signify (Chandler, 2007). In an attempt to make sense of the world, people differentiate objects and concepts in their reality by attributing to them different signs and employing different signifiers to signify them. In this respect, no sign makes sense on its own; but rather, a sign makes sense only in relation to other signs (Chandler, 2007). The word "loneliness" for this matter signifies the state of unpleasant subjective isolation, while "aleness" may signify a state of objective isolation, and "solitude" may signify a desired isolation (Gotesky, 1965).

There is inevitably some arbitrariness in the designation of any given signifier to that which it stands for in reality, and the meaning (i.e., signification) of any given word may vary considerably with every use of the word (Wittgenstein, 1958). Moreover, applying a concept to a phenomenon inevitably, and to some extent arbitrarily, discards the unique features of the phenomenon being conceptualized so as to have it fit with other phenomena of a similar kind (Nietzsche, 1979). A semiotic investigation may then strive to ascertain what it is that a signifier signifies in the context wherein it is used, and what it means to the agents who use it in that context. Therefore, understanding the contextualized meaning of loneliness is arguably a linguistic endeavor as much as it is a psychological one, and narratives may be extremely instrumental in such a semiotic investigation (Wood, 1987).

A semiotic approach to narrative analysis may enable the understanding of that which a word or phrase means to those who utilize it. This is done via an examination of the manner in which the word is linked to the elements constituting the narrative: actions, events, characters, and plot (Polkinghorne, 1988). As Wood (1987) argues, in order to apprehend what loneliness means in a given context, it might be fruitful to explore narratives produced by those who share that context and “try to identify the multireferential status of ‘lonely’ in ‘I am lonely’ statements” (p. 48). Adopting this approach, in the current study, I sought to investigate narratives wherein veterans explicitly speak of feeling lonely or otherwise explicitly state that they felt undesirably alone.

The aim of the current investigation was threefold: confirm, explore and delineate. The confirmatory objective was to examine whether the concept of experiential loneliness may apply to experiences constructed by veterans as loneliness/undesired aloneness. The exploratory objective was to examine what other discernable forms of loneliness may apply to such constructions? Finally, I aimed to identify and delineate the specific relational provisions that are perceived as deficient in these experiences and the relationships wherein these provisions are perceived as lacking. Ultimately, the goal was to provide a nuanced account of veterans’ experiences of loneliness.

Method

Collecting Narratives

Striving to obtain veterans’ constructions of their own loneliness, a major consideration at the outset of the study was not to influence the narratives under investigation with presuppositions external to those of the narrators—my own included. I wished to avoid any guiding questions that might insinuate that loneliness must adhere to any specific kind of isolation. Therefore, I sought narratives that were initiated by veterans, rather than narratives solicited by an external party. Extant, unsolicited narratives by veterans are ubiquitous these days and may be found in social media, documentaries, autobiographies, or memoirs. According to Frank (2012, p. 40), published memoirs present narrative researchers with a good entry point to the personal meanings of lived-experience because they “are the revised reflections of especially articulate individuals,” and hence “evoke a sense of being there, participating in the experiences that the author describes.” Taking these considerations into account, I sought monographs written by veterans about their experiences.

In collecting the material for the current investigation, I adopted a purposive approach to data collection. Though not pertaining to representatively account for all cases within the population under focus, purposive sampling is suitable for the explication of personal meanings via narrative analyses because it enables a deeper understanding of rich accounts most relevant to the issue under investigation (Polkinghorne, 2005). The search for appropriate books included an internet search for books written by veterans, wherein the authors relate to their experiences of war and homecoming. I also asked librarians and veteran acquaintances if they knew of such books.

The first criterion for inclusion in the study was that the authors recounted their own war and post-war experiences in the first person. Concomitantly, books addressing only the war period were excluded from the study, as were books that addressed these experiences solely from an external vantage point (e.g., academic monographs or edited books). Acknowledging that veterans may not necessarily conform to the preconceived identity of a traumatized veteran (Corley, 2017), the second criterion was that the authors explicitly referred to their war experiences as traumatic or traumatizing. The final inclusion criterion was that the books included explicit mentioning of the author being lonely or undesirably alone. In an attempt to transcend any specific war, I targeted books written by veterans of different wars and combat experiences. The books included in the study were all written in American English.

In the final analysis, four sources by American authors were included. From the Vietnam War I examined the book *Combat trauma: A personal look at long-term consequences* by James D. Johnson (2010). It is noteworthy that the book represents Johnson's attempt to tell the story of combat and its aftermath as lived through by 16 Vietnam combat veterans, Johnson included. Therefore, the book represents the semi-unified account of 16 individual participants rather than a single voice. Adding to the diversity, Johnson's coauthors come from diverse backgrounds: ethnic, socioeconomic, vocational, and military. All of the coauthors are reported to have suffered from PTSD.

From the Iraq war, I examined the book *The evil hours: A biography of post-traumatic stress disorder* by David J. Morris (2015). Morris is a former Marine infantry officer. He worked as a reporter rather than as a combatant in Iraq from 2004 to 2007. From the Israel-Gaza war of 2008 (Operation Cast Lead), I examined the book *Dreidel full of LEAD: From the wild west to the streets of Gaza* by Yared M. Ben-Caro (2015). Ben-Caro was born and raised in Arizona and moved to Israel in his early twenties in order to serve in the Israel Defense Force (IDF), wherein he served as a sniper in the IDF paratroopers. Finally, I also included Vietnam veteran Daryl S. Paulson's account in his book *Haunted by combat* (Paulson & Krippner, 2007), which combines Paulson's personal account and both authors' academic and clinical observations. The authors' permission to use the accounts for the current project was attained by contacting the authors via e-mail prior to publication, and names appear as they do in the original publications.

Analysis

The books were obtained both in hard copy and digital forms. Analysis included iterative readings of the texts. Throughout the reading process, all appearances of the terms "lonely," "loneliness," "alone," or "aleness" in the text were first sought manually in the process of reading the books, and then digitally via searches in the digital files. Narrative sections wherein one or more of these terms appeared in relation to the veterans' experiences after the war were extracted and saved in a designated file on the computer for future analysis. When the terms appeared in relation to non-veterans' experiences of loneliness, they were not subjected to further analysis [e.g., "...deployment of reservists has compromised the stability of intimate relationships with their partners and children, who experience loneliness" (Paulson & Krippner, 2007, p. 18)]. In order to avoid conflating loneliness and neutral or positive modes of isolation, only those cases wherein the aleness and loneliness were explicitly or implicitly indicated as subjective and undesirable experiences were further analyzed. Thus, for example, instances wherein authors mentioned a "lonely bench in the park" or being "alone in the room" were not considered representatives of a lonely experience and thus were not subjected to further analysis.

Each appearance of the aforementioned terms was assessed individually within the context where it appeared. Utilizing the matrix offered by Stein and Tuval-Mashiach (2015b), each excerpt was coded according to four parameters: a) the associated relational need(s), b) the relationship(s) within which the experience occurred, c) the Other(s) involved, and d) the type of isolation the excerpt implied. Additionally, an interpretative rationale was articulated for each excerpt. Table 1 below demonstrates the analysis of an excerpt from Morris (2015). The emerging interpretations were then systematically compared to one another in order to identify common as well as differential features of the experiences they signified (Saldaña, 2013). Seeking the overt meaning of the terms under investigation, interpretation followed a hermeneutics of faith (Josselson, 2004). That is, the interpretation remained as close to the text as possible, as the participants were considered the experts regarding their experience, and no meanings that are external to the text (e.g., theoretical) were sought. Adopting this approach was also intended as a means to avoid placing veterans in what

Corley (2017) calls “the veteran trope” – an a priori view of what a veteran “must” experience and express.

Table 1. An example of the analysis of a narrative excerpt

Narrative excerpt	“By reading the stories of Ernest Hemingway, Alice Sebold, Tim O’Brien, and others, survivors are doing more than simply being entertained, they are reifying literature’s essential function: <i>to remind us that we are not alone...</i> ” (Morris, 2015, p. 16; emphasis mine).
Relational needs	The need to know that others have undergone a similar experience
Relationship	General
Other	General
Type of isolation	Experiential
Interpretative rationale	The authors addressed by Morris are all mentioned as exemplars of people who wrote of their own experience of trauma. Hence, “alone” in this segment of narrative was interpreted as representing an isolation characterized by the sense that veterans such as Morris perceive themselves to be the only ones who have undergone such experiences – a conviction repudiated by the fact that other authors share similar experiences.

Findings

The terms under investigation were relatively rare in the publications that were inspected towards this study. In most publications, terms did not appear at all, or otherwise did not meet criteria for analysis. In the publications that were included in the final analysis the terms appeared infrequently. Notwithstanding, the volumes that were inspected towards this study were replete with depictions of experiences that alluded to veterans’ post-war isolation but failed to bear the label “loneliness.”

Throughout the analysis, the use of the terms under investigation assumed one of two forms: a) explicit references to the individual’s or the group’s aloneness and loneliness and b) a negation of such a state, typically but not exclusively in the form of attempts to reassure others in a similar situation that they are not alone or must not remain so, as in Morris’ excerpt in table 1 above. The explication below will follow this twofold manner of expression respectively.

The concept of “experiential loneliness,” introduced by Stein and Tuval-Mashiach (2015a), was suitable for addressing the experiences bearing the “loneliness” and “aloneness” titles in the narratives that were examined in the current study. The more nuanced semiotic examination revealed that the terms under investigation were imbued with several interrelated meanings: a) no one feels as I feel, b) no one can understand my experience, c) my experience cannot be shared or discussed with others who were not there, d) my authentic experiences are confined within and are invisible from the outside, e) I am an alien to civilian life and have lost the sense of home and its familiarity, and f) I must cope alone with my past and its repercussions.

Respectively, “you are not alone” and its variations were associated with the following meanings: a) you are not the only one feeling this way, b) there are others who can understand, c) there is someone to talk to, d) your fellow veterans are brothers who share your experience, and e) there are those who can help and there is no need to cope alone. It is noteworthy that these meanings are anything but disparate or mutually exclusive, and often coexisted within the narrative excerpts.

Throughout the explication below, italicized emphases in cited texts are my own, whereas boldfaced emphases appeared in bold in the original text.

Loneliness and Aloneness

Arguably, the most evocative and explicit contemplation of post-war loneliness and its relation to PTSD appeared in Ben-Caro's (2015) account. As demonstrated below, for Ben-Caro, "lonely" signifies a mental state, while "alone" signifies a physical isolation:

I had been asked more than once about the details of post-traumatic stress disorder. *One specific question was if I was lonely.* On the one hand, yes, to a degree. But that was kind of the point. It wasn't an issue of not being able to function socially. It was an issue of the fact that I genuinely knew that no one besides fellow combat veterans understood the psychological and emotional changes I was undergoing. *I didn't want to think about love. I didn't want to think about laughter. I didn't want to think about the future. I was stuck in a world of flashbacks and silent screaming. . . . Sure, I was lonely.* But somehow there was an abysmal comfort in being alone. Was it shame? Was it fear of how I would relate to society? Was it simply that I felt I was above the normal populace? Was it that I just felt so different from everyone else that I had no desire to try to blend? Maybe it was all of the above. Maybe it was something else entirely. (pp. 268–69)

Ben-Caro explicitly negates the notion that deficient social ties were the source of his loneliness. Rather, he expresses that his loneliness was one wherein he was convinced that no one could understand his experience. Being "stuck" in the experience of war, a phenomenon attributed to the ensuing PTSD, Ben-Caro became disinterested in relating to civilians, his relational needs such as love, mutual joy, and companionship were nullified by his experiential isolation. Aloneness then became a coping strategy to ward off any attempt to socialize. In this sense, for Ben-Caro, being physically alone was the antidote for being lonely.

Though Ben-Caro was the most explicit in reflecting about his loneliness, the experience was most commonly addressed by Johnson (2010). Johnson's first mention of the undesirable aloneness of the veteran appears in a parable adapted from Bob Scheyer. The parable portrays the time when God was presumably creating the model of the Vietnam combat veteran:

The Angel slowly ran his finger across the Vet's cheek and said, "Lord, there is a leak."

God said, "That's not a leak, that's a tear."

"What's the tear for?" asked the Angel.

"It's for the bottled-up emotions, for holding fallen soldiers as they die, for commitment to the American flag, for the terror of living with PTSD for decades after the war, *alone with its demons with no one to care or help.*"

"You're a genius," said the Angel, casting a gaze at the tear.

The Lord said, "I didn't put it there." (p. 15)

The author uses this parable to introduce readers to the suffering of the veteran. Much like Ben-Caro, "alone" here signifies being alone with the torment involved in the aftermath of war, and is portrayed as part and parcel of that suffering. There is no identifiable relationship wherein this aloneness transpires, however. It is seemingly an all-encompassing aloneness, wherein both war and postwar experiences, the "demons," are contained within the veteran rather than shared with others. But it also indicates that there is no one there to care or offer help. Hence "alone" may mean coping alone. Further demonstrating this is the account by a fellow veteran, Roy Moseman:

No one understood me. Friends and family didn't know what was inside me. I didn't know how to explain it to them. Then, after a while, I didn't want to. I went out every night and got drunk so that I could sleep. At times *I felt very lonely because I had all these problems going on but did not feel comfortable talking seriously about them to anyone.* It felt like I was the only one in the world having the nightmares and depression. (Johnson, 201, pp. 41–2; see also p. 47)

Moseman's lonely state is linked to the problems that he was facing at the time, difficulties which he felt he could not discuss or share with others. This sensation is more broadly linked within the narrative to the experience of being misunderstood by others, specifically friends and family. This misunderstanding is related to his incapacity to explain and communicate his experiences, resulting in the sense that he bears these experiences inside. Feeling alone then implies insuring that no one knows of his inner experience. Ultimately, the conviction that he was the only one who has been experiencing these tormenting sensations takes hold of him, and in this sense, he felt lonely.

For some veterans being alone was most explicitly associated with the eventuality of having to cope alone with their internal turmoil. This may be the result of lack of support, as Morris (2015) notes in the aftermath of his girlfriend, Erica, leaving him.

I can see now that Erica was simply unprepared for what was coming, the sheer weight of all my unprocessed dread . . . With Erica gone, everything became more difficult. I felt for the first time that *I was alone* in dealing with all the pain and uncertainty in my life. My nightmares and general disaffection with the world seemed to double. (Morris, 2015, p. 11)

Notably, Morris' loneliness appears after the termination of a romantic relationship. However, it is not in this context that it gains its meaning. Rather, it seems that Morris felt lonely because he lacked the necessary support that the relationship might have provided. What he needed was to enjoy the benefit of sharing an experience with another and dealing with it together, and that is what was critically missing once the relationship ended, and perhaps also before.

The provision of apt support may be implicated by the manner in which society welcomes the returning warrior, or otherwise fails to offer such a welcoming. As Paulson notes of his return from Vietnam:

During this period, there was little popular American citizen support for the war. Hence, like so many others who served there, *I felt totally alone and isolated*. I had to face my precombat anxiety *alone*. I had to deal with my fear and anguish of being killed – *alone*. Finally, I had to deal with my life upon coming back to the United States – *alone*. No one was there to cheer me or support me when I returned home. Much of the creation process of my new venture had to be done alone. I had to ferret out customers, design the working structure of BioScience, face an empty bank account – *alone*. Worse, I had to live with my terrors of going under and failing in this pursuit – *alone*. (Paulson & Krippner, 2007, p. 112)

Alone here means dealing with all the trials and tribulations of life by one's self. The underlying relational need is primarily that of support and assistance. However, complementing others' reluctance to offer support and assistance is the veteran's incapacity to disclose his experiences to others and the inclination to safeguard them within.

Like most of the rest of us, Mitch Perdue *fought his feelings alone*. He didn't or couldn't talk about it because there was no one to hear his feelings, which were left in his gut to simmer for years to come. (Johnson, 2010, p. 47)

The feelings following the war are such that need to be "fought," and this fighting, veterans may be convinced, must be done alone, inside and in isolation, for there is no one who may hear. It is then realized that this loneliness exceeds the social domains of family and friends and concerns society as a whole. It is within the societal domain that loneliness gains an additional meaning, as the next two excerpts reveal:

There are times when someone will ask, "Why aren't you over Vietnam? That's been four decades." Sometimes, this question and implied judgment results in expressions of rage. It reinforces that *we came home alone, not unlike walking point alone, not knowing what to expect or when we are going to be ambushed*. Welcome home? It feels to most of us that this statement can be understood only by other combat veterans. Welcome home! (Johnson, 2010, p. 44)

America at large expected us to return from combat like returning from an out-of-town high school sporting event and to pick up life like our trauma never occurred. No one seemed to care that while our peers at home were going to fraternity parties, fishing, hunting, dating, and otherwise living the “good life,” we were performing tasks of killing, maiming, and destroying while just trying to stay alive for one more day. *Most of us immediately felt all alone*, yet none of us deserved to have to sort through our combat trauma alone. No doubt, the inability to talk about our combat trauma has given us cause for untold pain for decades since. Not only had we not been welcomed home, we often felt compelled to keep silent and, in some cases, even to deny we had even served in Vietnam. (Johnson, 2010, p. 45)

Alone is once again linked to an undesired silence concerning the veterans’ experiences from the war. Nevertheless, here it is not due to the veteran’s incapacity to communicate the experience. Rather, this isolation is grounded in the lack of an audience which encourages the telling of war experiences and the unwillingness to listen, as well as an inherently different experiential background.

Ultimately, veterans may feel that what was formerly their home no longer bears the attributes of a home. Their admission of loneliness alludes to their sense of alienation and estrangement from civilians, once again, on an experiential plain, an experiential alienation of sorts. It then would seem that loneliness in the form of experiential alienation begins to reside within the veteran at the initial stages of homecoming, where the experiential world that he acquired on the battlefield collides with his countrymen’s quotidian war-free lives. He feels like he does not belong anywhere anymore.

So, most of us were really alone. It was like each of us were two different persons; one was what our family and friends remembered us as being and what they wanted us to be, and the other was having morbid and heart-wrenching stories in our hearts that needed to be told and heard. Unfortunately, *we had to go it alone* because we quickly learned that whoever heard our stories would be torn, shaken, and speechless. Our unhealed combat trauma left many of us with no tongue to tell our stories and no trust that anyone would hear and understand without judgment if we did tell. So we shut up—and took our pain inside. Psychologically and relationally, many of us are trapped in a time warp somewhere over the Pacific, no longer in Vietnam but not home either, for home was not like it was when we left. (Johnson, 2010, p. 43)

Being alone here means that one’s identity is bifurcated in such a manner that one part, a significant authentic part, is concealed and unshared with others and thus lonely; while another part is visible but altogether inauthentic. Put otherwise, no one sees the true “I” of the veteran, and hence he is alone. This sensation may be precipitated by the relentlessness of PTSD, or it may be precipitated by guilt and shame that render the companionship of God and Man an unviable option.

I could not go to God or church, for I had too much blood on my hands. I reasoned that no one wanted me now, not even God, for I had killed His children. *I felt completely alone and totally isolated.* I lived in an alien world with which I could not communicate. I did not fit in with the other college students, since I was a Vietnam veteran, but I did not fit in with the military, either. (Paulson & Krippner, 2007, p. 101)

One’s true self is then stranded to cope alone. Thus, the incapacity to describe the experience, the ineptitude of the audience to listen, the forces encouraging the veteran to safeguard the experience inside and cope alone, and finally the sense that home is no longer home—all of these are entangled together in a stratified, experientially isolated, lonely experience. It is against this backdrop that

efforts to alleviate loneliness are realized, particularly in the reassuring revelation that veterans do not have to be alone.

The Alleviation of Loneliness

From the very initial statements of Johnson's (2010) book, it is clear that mitigating veterans' loneliness was inherent to the message that the authors wished to convey. In this respect, the book as a whole grants its readers entry into this aspect of these veterans' discourse and sheds light on their lived-experiences of loneliness.

It is our hope that in reading about some of our struggles over the past four decades, others may identify and know that *they are not alone*, and that they can learn to manage the symptoms of PTSD and not have the symptoms rule their life. (p. 5)

... tens of thousands of combat veterans are trapped in their past and do not know what to do with their bottled-up feelings. We want them to know that *they are not alone* and that there are healthy ways to avoid keeping their bottles so tight. (p. 13)

Both excerpts represent an appeal to veterans to realize that "they are not alone." The meaning of this phrase now begins to crystallize. If being alone means that one is convinced that he is the only one who is undergoing the torment that war endows, then negating it is a reassurance that this is not the case. Particularly, the argument is that veterans not only share similar experiences, but also that they may be there for other veterans, thus breaching each other's loneliness. "At my first reunion," Charlie Taylor notes in this respect, "I realized that *I was not alone* and that *the weight I carried for many years was not mine alone*. My brothers are more important than ever in my remaining journey through life" (Johnson, 2010, pp. 156, 167). The veterans' realization that the brotherhood formed on the battlefield is one which carries on in their postwar lives is then paramount. Veterans' "brotherly" ties that are reestablished after the war become an escape route from loneliness as they enable experiential sharing, as Johnson (2010) notes:

Of course, already mentioned is the reestablishment of the brotherhood. That reestablishment is really like being reborn. We have the power and opportunity to heal ourselves with our brotherhood. As we become "peer therapists," our need for withdrawal or isolation is reduced and our psychological injuries are somewhat normalized. *We are not alone*. (p. 159)

From the veterans' perspective then, not being alone is strongly related to the healing process necessary after war trauma. Ultimately, the reassurance that one must not remain alone in this context means that one must not cope alone with the ramifications of his combat experiences. This is reiterated by Johnson throughout the book, and to this end Johnson and his coauthors dedicate their final appeal:

To the combat veteran from past wars: It is indeed OK to feel what you feel. Your feelings do not make you crazy. Even though it may have been many years since your combat experiences, your feelings are what they are. Don't deny them. *You are not alone, so don't stay alone*. Reach out – to your loved ones, to the Vet Center, and/or the VA. Help is available. Talk to your children about your combat experiences, and if you can't talk about it yet, write it for them. They'll love you for it (2010, p. 181).

Existential loneliness.

As noted above, Daryl Paulson is unique among the study participants in that his personal account is embedded within an academic and clinically oriented text (Paulson & Krippner, 2007) The analysis revealed that the aloneness addressed by Paulson went beyond specific experiences and was

endowed with existential meanings. This implies that the experience in this case is a more existential rather than experiential loneliness. For example:

That is, *one must face death and destruction alone, and one is alone in a meaningless world*, except for the meaning one gives it. *Yet in this aloneness, one is free to choose the way one "is."* We do not think that most existentialists went far enough in exploring this encounter with "Being." A surprising number of individuals we have studied find that, within this apparent chaos and aloneness, a deeper, more solidly grounded self emerges. (Paulson & Krippner, 2007, p. 119)

This ostensibly more reflective stance may very well be attributed to the fact that Paulson and Krippner both have a background in clinical psychology, and wrote their book from this perspective. Furthermore, it would seem that this existential stance stemmed from Paulson's initial experiential loneliness after it has been more reflexively processed. In this sense, the existential tone attributed to the aloneness at hand, the embracing of being alone with one's experiences rather than fighting it, is part of the solution, rather than the problem.

One of the first acts of courage in counseling is to acknowledge that *one is essentially "alone" with one's subjective experience*. No one else sees things exactly like you, no one feels exactly like you, and no one can know you exactly the way you do. But, out of this aloneness, a client finds his or her real Self, a discovery that eventually provides a tremendous amount of satisfaction. (Paulson & Krippner, 2007, p. 114)

The acknowledgement of Man's solitary existential predicament, some would suggest, is the process that existential loneliness fosters rather than the experience itself (Ettema et al., 2010). Thus, Paulson and Krippner (2007) offer an alternative route to authenticity, one that does not involve having others learn of the veteran's experience, but rather the veteran accepting that he or she is essentially alone. As they note, "*This is a lonely time*, requiring courage 'to begin anew' and to live in accord with a new-found inner truth" (p. 114).

Discussion

The current semiotic investigation was devised in order to examine the meanings underlying veterans' constructions of their experiences of loneliness. Specifically, the study aimed to examine what form of undesirable aloneness do the terms "lonely," "loneliness," "alone," and "aloneness" signify in the context at hand. Are they used in order to signify a sense of experiential loneliness? Or do they signify any other form of loneliness?

The study also aimed to uncover the specific deficiencies in relational provisions that these experiences indicate and the relationships wherein these provisions are perceived as lacking. The analysis of four published written accounts by veterans revealed a stratified experiential loneliness, constituted by six closely interrelated experiences: a) being the only one who feels in a certain way, b) not being understood, c) being unable to communicate the experience, d) having the experience concealed or invisible to others, e) feeling alien and homeless in a civilian world, and f) being alone in coping. These were expressed vis-à-vis proximate relationships such as family and friends, but also, and primarily, in the broader, more general, national and societal context. Notably, one major domain wherein the veterans explicitly expressed that this isolation does not manifest, is the relationship they maintain with other veterans. Sharing the experiences of war and its emotional aftermath, this "brotherhood" of veterans seems to breach veterans' experiential isolation.

The novelty of the current study is not in describing the isolated experiences of veterans after the war. Truly, the phenomena delineated above have all been observed by scholars in the distant past (e.g., Schuetz, 1945; Waller, 1944), as well as in more recent years (e.g., Ahern et al., 2015; Brewin, Garnett, & Andrews, 2011; Caplan, 2011; Junger, 2016; Sherman, 2015; Smith & True,

2014; Stein & Tuval-Mashiach, 2015a). The findings in the current study are nevertheless novel and important in that, to the best of my knowledge, they represent the first systematically derived evidence linking these phenomena to veterans' own meaning of loneliness. In this sense, the current study complements previous studies by bridging the interpretative gap, and demonstrating the manner in which veterans' own construction of "loneliness" and "aleness" may correspond with the multifaceted experience of experiential isolation.

Furthermore, the detailed findings from the semiotic investigation above are of importance in underscoring the nuances of veterans' experiential loneliness: the various relational needs that are involved, and the relational contexts in which the experiences manifest themselves. The need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), for instance, which may be so dominant in veterans' post-war realities (e.g., Junger, 2016), is the most pertinent when considering experiential alienation, but is not the main issue to be considered when attempting to address veterans' sense of having to cope alone. Similarly, the human need to have others share one's experiences (Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009) may be essential to the facet of loneliness whereby veterans feel utterly misunderstood by society, but may be secondary to the sense that one must remain inauthentic in what he reveals of his internal experiences. The current findings underscore that for veterans all of these closely related facets of experiential loneliness work in tandem to forge the gestalt, which is the veteran's experience of post-war loneliness.

Furthermore, the realization that the loneliness consolidates primarily vis-à-vis society at large, and may to a certain degree be assuaged in the company of other veterans, is crucial for understanding the experience and manners in which it may be ameliorated (e.g., Junger, 2016). This realization may serve to explain the finding that society's support at homecoming may be more important to veterans than familial support (Karstoft, Armour, Elklit, & Solomon, 2013); and that military loneliness as a whole is somewhat different than civilian loneliness in its relational infrastructure (J. T. Cacioppo et al., 2016). These realizations bear important implications for intervention.

Clinical and Societal Implications

Understood through the lens of loneliness, the findings above may bear important clinical and societal implications. For many researchers, loneliness is synonymous with *perceived social isolation* (S. Cacioppo et al., 2015), denoting the sense of a deficiency in the quality or quantity of social relationships. Within this conceptualization, therapeutic interventions designed to ameliorate loneliness focus primarily on improving social skills, increasing opportunities for social contact, increasing social support, or addressing maladaptive social cognitions (Masi, Chen, Hawkey, & Cacioppo, 2011). The findings in the current study suggest that in order to adequately address veterans' loneliness, we must first expand our perspective and emancipate ourselves from loneliness' ostensible synonymy with perceived social isolation. In so doing, we may consider interventions that seek to go beyond the furthering of social connections. In order to "be there" for veterans, the focus must be swayed from the social domain to the experiential and intersubjective. This becomes pertinent when PTSD is considered, as reconnection may be a pivotal element in overcoming trauma (J. L. Herman, 1992).

PTSD is a pathology that is strongly connected to an experience that precipitated it. The findings presented above suggest that so is the loneliness which veterans associate with their trauma. Therefore, primarily two routes of intervention may be considered. The first route is that of reconnection. If the goal is to alleviate veterans' loneliness by fostering reconnection, therapists and support providers must be willing to participate in veterans' experiences. Moreover, clinicians as well

as family members may wish to get more familiar with what the experience is like in order to foster apt empathic connection (Miller, 1983) and intersubjective attunement (Carr, 2011).

As noted above, overcoming loneliness of this kind is not solely, and perhaps not primarily, the responsibility of therapists. Society must participate in the healing process by listening, soliciting and engaging in the stories and lived-experiences veterans wish to share (Caplan, 2011; Sherman, 2015). Supporters must strive to be educated in the meanings of war experiences and the language of PTSD. Veterans may be particularly instrumental in this sense since they already share the experiences at hand. At the same time, veterans must surrender the expectation that others will completely understand their experiences, and work to improve their communication skills so as to convey their experiences as best as they can.

Alternatively, veterans may benefit from relinquishing the desire to connect with others for the opportunity of connecting with their own selves. One possibility of this type is to pursue an existential route, wherein experiential loneliness becomes an existential predicament that must be acknowledged, as suggested by Paulson and Krippner (2007). The effectiveness of either route both in mitigating loneliness and in the overall countering of trauma's aftermath remains to be determined by future research.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

The findings in the current study must be interpreted within the context of several limitations. First, the interpretation presented above cannot be generalized to all veterans for two main reasons: the sample is small and culturally homogeneous and sampling was purposive rather than random. Furthermore, the current study focused solely on men, and thus the experiences of female veterans is not accounted for in this study. Women face additional isolation than men during war (Benedict, 2009), and may also experience homecoming and loneliness somewhat differently, though not completely differently. Future studies should include a larger and more diverse sample. Notwithstanding, it is noteworthy that the qualitative investigation of experience via narratives does not strive for generalization. Rather, compromising quantity for quality, the attempt is to achieve deep understanding of the data and strive to ground interpretation in rich and thick descriptions that may empirically support it, so that it may be transferable (e.g., Tracy, 2010). One way in which transferability of the findings above may be demonstrated is by examining the accounts of traumatized veterans who turn to receive peer-support from other veterans. When these veterans explain the benefits of the peer-interaction they state that “We have all witnessed terrible events and we all experience PTSD. We are all suffering, but *now we are no longer alone*. We understand and know each other’s suffering and we support each other” (Caddick, Phoenix, & Smith, 2015, p. 291). Or “I think it would help you feel like *you’re not alone* and what happened to you happens to a lot of others” (Hundt, Robinson, Arney, Stanley, & Cully, 2015, p. 853). Nevertheless, establishing the prevalence of the meanings delineated above necessitates a quantitative investigation. Moreover, considering that the analysis and interpretation in the current study were done by a sole coder, it is important to further address this topic from additional perspectives. The current study is only a preliminary step in this much-needed endeavor.

Secondly, veterans are likely susceptible to any kind of loneliness that other people are exposed to. It may be suggested, in light of the findings of current investigation, that experiential loneliness is the form of loneliness that manifests most readily when veterans assume the identity of “veterans” within a civilian surrounding. Whether that identity is met with civilians' expectations that the returning veteran conform to the “traumatized veteran trope” (Corley, 2017), or whether the veteran senses that he or she is expected to reassume civilian roles as he or she had prior to

deployment. Other forms of loneliness may be more loosely linked to the war experience and the “veteran” identity. This speculation remains to be tested.

Finally, the accounts above are derived from published material rather than naturally emerging narratives. While written and spoken discourses may share a continuum concerning the naturalness of their occurrence, they nevertheless bear several differences (Perakyla & Ruusuvaori, 2011). Hence, the findings above are also limited in accounting for more naturally occurring talk. Addressing this issue, it is noteworthy that narratives, especially written testimonies and autobiographical narratives (Beverley, 2005; Freeman, 2007), are not to be apprehended as accurate or inaccurate depictions of reality, but rather as purposive speech acts devised for the purpose of conveying a message (D. Herman, Phelan, Rabinowitz, Richardson, & Warhol, 2012; Polkinghorne, 1988). This understanding of narrative is pertinent in trauma testimonies wherein testimony is part of the healing effort (e.g., Andrews, 2010; Felman & Laub, 1992). The accounts above have the capacity to penetrate and represent lived experiences and thus convey a certain lonely experience. Hence, their significance as signifiers of experiential loneliness remains. Future studies should nevertheless replicate the current endeavor with more naturally emerging narratives.

Notwithstanding the limitations above, being the first to offer a semiotic explication of loneliness in veterans’ narratives, the main contribution of the current study is in offering a nuanced articulation of the veteran’s post-war loneliness from their perspective. Given the detrimental ramifications of loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2015), and given that social-support is paramount for recovery after trauma (Brewin et al., 2000), this may be essential.

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