Old Batswana persons' experience of loneliness: Applying the Mmogo-method[TM]

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Acknowledgements

To the older persons from Ikageng – *re a leboga mogo maswe*. Your experiences are precious to us and we appreciate your willingness to share your stories with us.

To all the translators – We couldn't have done it without you. Your contribution was vital to our success – you did an amazing job of not only learning essential research skills but bringing your own skills into the research process.

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I attribute what I am and what I've been able to achieve to the King of Kings through the grace of my Heavenly Father in Jesus Christ – to whom all glory belongs, Amen!

Preface

The candidate opted to write an article, with the support of her supervisor.

Prof. Vera Roos

Summary

Old Batswana persons' experience of loneliness: applying the Mmogo-method^{TM}

Ageing in Africa and the world over is a phenomenon that affects individuals and societies. The expanding older population (people aged 60+) in South Africa led to this research, which represents an attempt to explore the experiences of loneliness of older persons in Africa and thereby gain some understanding of the subjective experiences of loneliness of a group of older African persons in their socio-cultural context.

Defining loneliness from the existing literature was challenging since it became evident that loneliness in the literature is defined and researched largely in terms of individual meanings attached to the concept, and the applicability of such individual meanings to an African context remains unconfirmed. Experiences of loneliness are not well known among older Setwana-speaking persons, and few studies have focused on collectivistic experiences as such. Loneliness is considered a complex, contextual experience that goes beyond the individual and also includes culture as an inseparable aspect of people's lives. Conceptualising loneliness as a socially constructed phenomenon places this study within the paradigm of phenomenology exploring people's experiences. The philosophy of *ubuntu* relates to being in the world among others thus creating the concept of a social self. In essence, to be a self, one has to belong to a community, and one is always contextualised as an existence among others in interaction.

A qualitative design was used together with a purposive convenience sampling method whereby the participants were selected on the basis of their availability during the research period. The participants' ages ranged from 61 up to 73, and the sample included 16 female and two male participants. Two data sets were collected at different times from members of the Day Care Centre for the Aged in Ikageng, Potchefstroom, South Africa, as well as community residents who did not attend the centre.

Various qualitative techniques were used to collect the data including the Mmogo-method^{TM}, in-depth individual interviews and focus groups. Multiple methods were employed for analysing the data

including phenomenological analysis, key-words-in-context and analysis strategies as stipulated by the Mmogo-method[TM]. The rigour of the data was enhanced through the use of diverse qualitative data-gathering methods as well as an array of qualitative analysis methods in a process known as crystallisation. Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, under a larger project, "An exploration of enabling contexts (05K14)".

The researchers constructed two main themes from the findings: descriptions of loneliness and coping with loneliness. Loneliness related to the self and to others, and coping with loneliness involved actively engaging with the environment, being with others and using coping strategies. Some of the findings are linked to the existing literature, and some are unique relating to being with others and including social embeddedness as a multi-layered phenomenon connected to experiences of loneliness – it is here where the literature falls short in clarifying the findings within our context. Suggestions are made for future research, and some of the limitations of the study are pointed out.

To conclude: Loneliness is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that older Batswana people experience on many levels of engagement with and disengagement from the self and others.

Keywords: Batswana, elderly, older persons, qualitative, Mmogo-method[TM], crystallisation, *ubuntu*, social embeddedness, culture

Opsomming

Ouer Batswana persone se ervaring van eensaamheid: Toepassing van die Mmogo-metode^{TM}

Veroudering in Afrika en dwarsoor die wêreld, is 'n allesomvattende fenomeen wat individue en gemeenskappe beïnvloed. Die gegewe van 'n bevolking wat steeds ouer word, met mense van 60 jaar en ouer, het hierdie navorsing aangevuur in 'n poging om ouer persone binne 'n Afrika-konteks, se ervaring van eensaamheid te bestudeer –

soos dit binne hul sosio-kulturele konteks ervaar is deur 'n groep ouer Afrikane.

Dit was 'n uitdaging om eensaamheid op grond van die bestaande literatuur te definieer, aangesien dit hoofsaaklik gedefinieer en ondersoek is in terme van individuele betekenis wat daaraan geheg is en aangesien die toepaslikheid hiervan vir 'n Afrika-konteks nog onbevestig is. Binne die navorsingskonteks is die ervarings van eensaamheid onder Setswana-sprekende ouer persone nie goed bekend nie en min studies het op kollektivistiese ervarings as sodanig gefokus. Eensaamheid word beskou as 'n komplekse, kontekstuele ervaring wat verder as net die individu strek en ook die kultuur, as onlosmaaklike aspek van mense se lewens, insluit. Die konseptualisering van eensaamheid as 'n sosiaal gekonstrueerde fenomeen, plaas hierdie studie binne die paradigma van fenomenologie, asook binne die filosofie van *ubuntu* –die bestaan in die wêreld omring van andere in, waardeur die konsep van sosiale self geskep word. Essensieel moet mens aan 'n gemeenskap behoort om 'n self te kan wees en word mens altyd gekontekstualiseer as 'n bestaan tussen andere, wat in interaksie is.

'n Kwalitatiewe ontwerp is gebruik – met die doelgerigte steekproeftrekkingmetode waardeur deelnemers gekies is op grond van hul beskikbaarheid gedurende die navorsingstydperk. Die deelnemers se ouderdomme het van 61 tot 73 jaar gestrek, met 16 vroulike en 2 manlike deelnemers. Twee datastelle is op verskillende tydstippe versamel by sowel lede van die Dagsorgsentrum vir Bejaardes in Ikageng, Potchefstroom, Suid-Afrika, as ook ander inwoners van die gemeenskap wat nie lede van die sentrum is nie.

'n Verskeidenheid kwalitatiewe tegnieke is gebruik om die data in te samel – insluitende die Mmogo-metode[TM], in-diepte individuele onderhoude en fokusgroepe. 'n Verskeidenheid metodes is gebruik om die data te analiseer, waaronder: fenomenologiese analise; sleutelwoorde-in-konteks; en ook analitiese strategieë wat deur die Mmogo-metode[TM] gestipuleer word. Vir die doel van hierdie studie, is die betroubaarheid van die data verhoog deur verskeie kwalitatiewe data-insamelingsmetodes, asook 'n verskeidenheid kwalitatiewe analitiese metodes, te gebruik in 'n proses wat as kristallisering bekend staan. Etiese goedkeuring is verleen deur die Etiese komitee van die Noordwes-Universiteit, Potchefstroomkampus, onder die indeling "'n Verkenning van bemagtigende kontekste (05K14)."

Uit die bevindinge het die navorsers twee hooftemas kon konstrueer, naamlik: Beskrywings van eensaamheid; en die hantering van eensaamheid. Die beskrywings het eensaamheid ten opsigte van die self en ander ingesluit, terwyl die hantering van eensaamheid aktiewe betrokkenheid by die omgewing, die saamwees met ander, en die gebruik van intrapersoonlike hanteringsmeganismes ingesluit het. Die bevindinge hou verband met dié in bestaande literatuur en daar word ook gewys op 'n paar unieke bevindinge wat verband hou met die saamwees met andere en sosiale begronding as 'n veelvlakkige fenomeen wat verband hou met eensaamheid – waar die literatuur te kort skiet om die bevindinge binne ons konteks duidelik te kan maak. Voorstelle word gemaak vir toekomstige navorsing, terwyl sommige van die beperkinge van hierdie studie ook uitgewys word.

Samevattend kan gesê word dat eensaamheid 'n multi-dimensionele fenomeen is wat deur Batswana-mense op baie vlakke van betrokkenheid en onbetrokkenheid, van die self en andere, ervaar word.

Sleutelwoorde: Batswana, bejaardes, ouer persone, kwalitatief, Mmogo-metode[TM], kristallisasie, *ubuntu*, sosiale gegrondheid, kultuur

MANUSCRIPT FOR EXAMINATION

Old Batswana persons' experience of loneliness: Applying the Mmogo-method[TM]

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Old Batswana persons' experience of loneliness: Applying the Mmogo-method™

Abstract

Ageing in Africa and the world is an all-encompassing phenomenon that affects individuals and societies. An expanding older population (people aged 60+) in South Africa led to this research, which represents an attempt to explore the experiences of loneliness from an African *ubuntu* perspective and thus gain some understanding of the subjective experiences of loneliness in specific socio-cultural contexts as the existing literature's applicability to these contexts is uncertain.

A qualitative research design was used together with a purposive sampling method whereby a Setswana-speaking sample of older persons (16 women and two men) from Ikageng, Potchefstroom, South Africa was selected. Two data sets were collected on different occasions from members attending the Day Care Centre for the Aged in Ikageng as well as community residents who did not attend the centre. Multiple methods used for data gathering included in-depth individual interviews, focus groups, the Mmogo-method™, reflexive notes and observation. Multiple data analyses included phenomenological analysis, key-words-in-context and strategies stipulated by the Mmogo-method™. Multiple analyses enhanced trustworthiness through crystallisation. The results showed loneliness to be a multi-dimensional phenomenon of social embeddedness that people experience on many levels of engagement with and disengagement from the self and others.

Keywords: Batswana, elderly, qualitative, Mmogo-method™, crystallisation, *ubuntu*, socio-cultural, social embeddedness

Ageing in Africa and the world is an all-encompassing phenomenon and "an individual and societal experience" (Timonen, 2008, p. 3). Against the background of an expanding older population, people aged 60 and older, and the well-known implications of loneliness for the mental health of older persons (Wilkonson & Pierce, 1997), this research attempted to explore the experiences of loneliness of older persons in an African context. The aim of the research was therefore to gain an understanding of the subjective experiences of loneliness of a group of African older persons within their socio-cultural context.

Defining loneliness on the basis of the existing literature was challenging **si**nce it became evident that loneliness in the literature is defined and researched largely in terms of individual meanings attached to loneliness (Bofill, 2004; Pirkko et al., 2006; Savikko, Routasalo, Tilvis, Strandberg & Pitkälä, 2005). For example, loneliness has been researched in relation to the risk factors that contribute to the experience of loneliness (De Jong Gierveld, Van Tilburg & Dykstra, 2006; Victor, Scambler, Bowling & Bond, 2005). Such risk factors, according to De Jong Gierveld cited in Victor et al. (2005), include socio-demographic attributes (living alone, being female, not having any surviving children, living arrangements, being 75 or more years old); material circumstances (poverty, limited education and low income); health resources (disability, self-assessed health, mental health, cognitive function, anxiety and depression); social resources (size of social network, isolation, time alone and presence of a confidante); and life events (recent bereavement and admission of a relative/spouse into care). Weiss (1973) introduces a multi-dimensional description of loneliness and distinguishes between emotional and social loneliness. Emotional loneliness refers to the absence of a significant other or close emotional attachment while social loneliness refers to the absence of a larger social network. In this regard, Victor, Scambler and Bond (2009) also note that loneliness and social isolation are often seen as a common phenomenon associated with later life although "it is broadly agreed that loneliness is not directly connected to social

isolation" (De Jong Gierveld, Van Tilburg & Dykstra, 2006,   p. 495). This implies that some isolated people may not experience loneliness while those surrounded by others may experience it.

The individualistic approach to the study of loneliness was also noted in the research on the coping mechanisms that older persons use to deal with loneliness (De Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 2008; Lazarus, 2000; Rokach, 1999; Rokach, Orzech & Neto, 2004), e generally described as an individual achievement. The above research, however, tends to depart from Western theories and paradigms with their focus on the individual. Although some of the research was conducted in third world countries (Duncan, Ntshangase & Roos, 2007; Hanks, 2008; Kelly & Steed, 2004), its applicability to an African context remains unknown. Loneliness, for the purpose of this research, is defined rather as a socially constructed phenomenon that is embedded in the social and cultural context in which it occurs (Rokach & Bacanli, 2001; Rokach, 2007) and that underpins older persons' actions and interactions. The manifestation of loneliness is thus a function of the reciprocal relationship between the social (Victor, Scambler, Bond & Bowling, 2000) and the subjective (Wenger, Davis, Shahtahmasebi & Scott, 1996). The researchers accordingly agree with De Jong Gierveld, Tilburg and Dykstra (2006) that loneliness is a complex, contextual experience that goes beyond the individual and also includes culture as an inseparable aspect of lonely people's lives. The conceptualisation of loneliness as a socially constructed phenomenon places this study within the paradigm of phenomenology – more specifically that as stipulated by Watsuji (cited in St. Clair, 2004) as an extension of Heidegger's 'being in the world' to 'being in the world among others' thereby creating the concept of a social self. In essence, to be a self, one has to belong to a community – the true self is always contextualised as an existence among others in interaction.

When considering loneliness in an African context, it is apparent that many older persons are marginalised through lack of resources, poverty, physical distances to health services and an increasing focus on other vulnerable population groups such as young children (Aboderin, 2005). Older persons'

financial, physical and emotional resources are heavily taxed as they are often required to look after

dependants, including young orphans and ill, unemployed children, as a result of the AIDS epidemic

(http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/search). Current ageing studies have "given rise to much discussion and many

(attempted) policy changes in the developed countries" and have also become an important focus area in

many parts of the developing world (Timonen, 2008, p. 3). There is accordingly often little understanding

of older persons' contributions to and influence on care policy development, especially with regard to

informal care and age-related social processes that shape individuals, families, societies and communities

(Aboderin, 2005; De Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 2008; Mudege & Ezeh, 2009). This has a negative impact

on older persons since their needs are not taken into consideration and their inputs are not incorporated

into their own futures. Research on older persons in Sub-Saharan Africa has been guided by policy

makers' need to address social isolation and loneliness (Aboderin, 2005). Because older persons' needs

are frequently not reflected in existing policies, it is important to understand how older persons

experience loneliness in terms of their social relatedness within their culture. The question that guided

this research was: What is the nature of the social embeddedness in relation to Batswana older persons'

experiences loneliness grounded in their socio-cultural context as observed in behavioural manifestations

and subjective experiences? If we could understand loneliness from a contextual perspective, we could

possibly highlight the contribution of older persons as well as the impact this may have on policy

development with regard to informal care. The social processes associated with loneliness could be

purposeful to treat loneliness (Aboderin, 2005; De Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 2008; Mudege & Ezeh,

2009).

Research Methodology

A qualitative approach was used to access rich data based on the premise that older persons are the

experts of their own experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and also because qualitative research provides

a contextual understanding of subjective experiences (Hanks, 2008; Mkhize, 2004; Osei-Hwedie, 1996; Stein & Mankowski, 2004). Shared life experiences can give researchers in-depth information (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and valuable insight into the participants' lives that could otherwise be overlooked (Braun & Clark, 2006; Greatrex-White, 2008; McNamara, 2005; Nelson, 2008; Orbe, 2000).

Participants and their Research Context

For the purpose of this research, it was decided to focus on Batswana older persons who place a lot of importance on collective togetherness, "common sense, compassion, wisdom, respect, gentleness, love and universal harmony" (Haegert, 2000, p. 120). The Setswana-speaking participants in the study were elderly black people who had been disadvantaged by apartheid policies in South Africa prior to 1994. Apartheid segregated individuals and communities based on ethinicity and language and was applied in South Africa by the government from 1948 to 1991 (Berger, 2009; Van Ginneken, Lewin & Berridge, 2010). These older persons lived in Ikageng, on the outskirts of Potchefstroom (North West Province, South Africa), after they had been displaced in accordance with the Group Areas Act (South Africa, 1966; Christopher, 1997). Most African older persons could not prepare adequately for their old age (Peterson, 2010) and in this area, the people today depend on the Day Care Centre for the Aged to provide assistance to older persons in the community whose only fixed income is their government old age pension, which they qualify for from the age of 60. In many instances, the older persons in this community have multiple dependants who rely on their funds and care for survival.

A purposive sampling method was used to select the participants based on their availability during the research period. The sampling was done according to Patton's purposive sampling types in terms of which the researchers used convenience and sensitive samples in order to save costs and to attract attention to this specific case study respectively (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, 2005). The participants were recruited through snowball sampling and negotiations with key members of the centre and the residential

community who acted as gatekeepers for the different groups of participants. The participants were all 60 years or older − this age group falls under the classification of older persons according to the World Health Organisation (WHO, accessed October 29, 2007). The participants' ages ranged from 61 to 73. Sixteen were women and two were men.
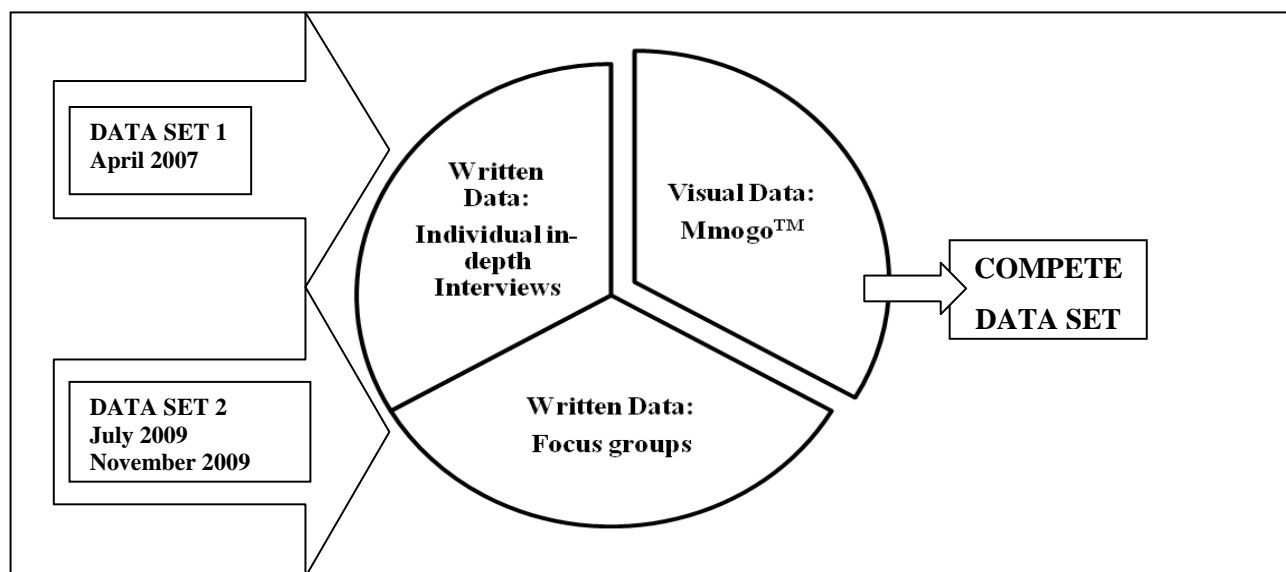
Procedure

Figure 1: The different data sources that contributed to the analysis of the participants' experiences of loneliness

   Two data sets were collected. The first was from the participants who attended the Day Care Centre for the Aged in Ikageng. The researchers contacted the centre manager and made an appointment to discuss and carry out the research with older persons from the centre during April 2007. A date was agreed upon, and the participants were asked to meet us at the centre. The second data set was collected during July and November 2009. The process was similar to the April 2007 data collection procedure. A member from the community was asked to act as the gatekeeper and to arrange a meeting in her residential area. She duly requested willing participants in her neighbourhood to join us at her house. By

collecting two data sets, we ensured the trustworthiness of the data and data saturation (Terre Blance et al., 2006; Ellingson, 2009).

Translators were trained to facilitate the data collection with the participants. Care was taken to ensure that they had the necessary interviewing skills and were familiar with the data collection methods that included taking field notes, making observations, interviewing participants and facilitating focus groups. They also had to be familiar with the materials used for the Mmogo-method[TM] some of which are shown in Figure 2 (the building materials included clay, beads and incema grass stalks; and the use of tape recorders and cameras).

Figure 2: Materials for the Mmogo-method

Stein and Mankowski (2004) stress the need for researchers and participants who want to contribute something meaningful to the research process rather than just provide information. In order to gain a greater understanding of loneliness, the researchers investigated the underlying processes thereof rather than just looking at the results in a reporting manner (Victor et al., 2005). This underlines the need to consider loneliness as part of lived experiences or as phenomenological experiences of life events within context as opposed to applying theories that do not fit the context they were intended for (Hanks, 2008; McInnis & White, 2001; Victor, Scambler, Bond & Bowling, 2000).

Data Gathering

Various qualitative techniques were used to collect the data including the Mmogo-method[TM], in-depth individual interviews and focus groups.

The Mmogo-method[TM]. The Mmogo-method[TM] is a research method in terms of which people present their own data by making visual representations that reflect symbolic, contextually grounded meanings (Roos, 2008). The method allows researchers to access and clarify the symbolism behind the visual representations within the participants' cultural context. As part of the Mmogo-method[TM], an inductive-exploratory and contextual approach formed the basis of the study with the aim of collecting rich, descriptive, exploratory data (Roos, 2008). After the model had been completed, it was explored using open-ended, non-directive questions to obtain rich, descriptive data (Goodman, 2001). This projective technique enables researchers to access information on the "personal and collective experiences embedded in social and cultural contexts" that people "share as a result of their heredity and socialisation as well as experiences unique to their group". The technique thus allows researchers to "gain a deeper understanding of the relational dimensions" of the participants (Roos, 2010, p. 5). The participants were given the opportunity to explain their models and to say how the models related to the research question. They could then add additional information if they wished.

The participants were grouped around a table in groups of 10-12 participants per table. They were given the Mmogo-method[TM] building materials and asked to build a model:

Please build a model showing us how you experience loneliness.

They were encouraged to build whatever they wanted to and were assured that there were no expectations regarding the outcome of their models – they could share whatever they wanted to with the researchers (Roos, 2008). During the building of the models, the researchers observed the participants and took field notes. Once the models had been completed, digital photos were taken of them (visual

recording of data). Individual interviews were then held to explore the meaning of a particular model and its contents and how they related to the research question. After the individual interviews, a focus group discussion gave the researchers and the participants the opportunity to discuss their own and other participants' models and ideas regarding loneliness (Roos, 2008).

Audio data were recorded using voice recorders, transcribed verbatim at a later stage (Silverman, 2000) and translated from Setswana into English. The subsequent data analysis was done according to the guidelines set out under analysis of the Mmogo-method^{TM} (Roos, 2008) and an additional analysis method: key-words-in-context (KWIC) (Fielding & Lee, 1998), which will be described later.

Individual interviews and focus groups. Individual interviews (Goodman, 2001) followed the Mmogo-method^{TM} to clarify information relating to the particular models and to provide additional information. The focus group discussion following the individual interviews allowed the participants to reflect on their own and other participants' models (Roos, 2008) and provided an opportunity to collect additional data (McLafferty, 2004). During the data collection for the second data set, an additional focus group similar to the Mmogo-method^{TM} focus group was held. During this second focus group, personification was used to access information on the participants' experiences of loneliness using the following question.

If loneliness was a person walking into this room, what would he/she look like?

The focus groups allowed the participants to give feedback to one another. The use of a focus group as a method of data collection in addition to the Mmogo-method^{TM} and individual interviews ensured the trustworthiness of the data (Ellingson, 2009).

Reflexive notes and field notes on our observations were used to ensure the integrity of the findings. The data were collected on three occasions, namely April, 2007; July, 2009 and November, 2009. This ensured prolonged engagement in the field, which also contributed to the integrity of the findings. The

last date served as part of a member-checking opportunity during which the participants could reflect on

the analysed data thus strengthening the rigour and trustworthiness of the data (Fielding & Lee, 1998;

Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

Data Analysis

      Written data analysis. Two methods were used to analyse the written data. The

phenomenological analysis as suggested by Giorgi and Giorgi (2008) and the key-words-in-context

(KWIC) analysis of Fielding and Lee (1998) and Leech & Onwuegbuzie (2007).

    (1) The phenomenological analysis process helped the researchers obtain a concrete description of

loneliness through individual in-depth interviews that were transcribed verbatim at a later stage.

Throughout this process, the researchers maintained a psychological perspective as well as

phenomenological attitude in which they were mindfully sensitive towards the participants. The

researchers familiarised themselves with the data during this phase. (2) A sense of the whole was

established, and meaning units were determined after looking at the data more carefully, but no further

analysis was done during this phase. (3) The previous phases contained information provided by the

participants − this phase involved translating these expressions into explicit psychological meanings,

which was done by going back to the beginning and transforming each meaning unit into expressions that

conveyed the psychological sense of what had been said. (4) Finally, a general structure of the experience

of loneliness was provided in the discussion of the findings based on the first three phases.

    The second analysis conducted on the Mmogo-method^{TM} written data was done through KWIC by

Fielding and Lee (1998) and Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007). They describe KWIC analysis as viewing

specific words or phrases of interest by looking at what words are used before and after these key phrases

and considering them in their context as opposed to viewing them in isolation. First, the researchers read

through the data looking for keywords or phrases that occur either frequently or in an unusual way. These

phrases are then listed centrally in a column, and, on each side, words accompanying the phrase before and after are included in the columns to the left and right of the key phrase. A possible interpretation is then written to the right of the columns, which can be compared with the interpretations of the other phrases. KWIC can help identify underlying concepts or connections between concepts or key phrases so that a phrase does not lose its meaning – an essential part of the process − since this method of analysis has been criticised on this point.

Visual data analysis. Roos (2008) suggests a detailed data analysis strategy following the subsequent stages that occur in sequence. After the data collection, analysis is done on different levels as the data consists of different layers. The visual representations represent the first, explicit layer on the basis of which a conscious meaning is explained. A second level hones in on the implicit or unconscious meanings (what the artefact(s) mean(s) or how it relates to the research question), a third layer links the visual data with their descriptions, and the researchers then create themes and sub-themes that show how the data relate to each other. As Roos (2008, p. 662) puts it, "[t]he Mmogo-method^{TM} aims to go beyond the isolated individual when trying to understand human functioning, and studies social life through exploration and inspection".

This exploration entails the participants exploring their own models and making their own analyses about what they have built as part of the first layer of analysis. The second layer is analysed by means of individual and group narratives reflecting on how the participants' models relate to the research question. During this stage, the participants are encouraged to give meaning to the symbols of their models. The researchers carefully question these underlying meanings to gain "insight into communal practices and behaviour" (Roos, 2008, p. 662). Finally, the researchers create themes showing the relationships between the created objects.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the quality of data, triangulation is generally an essential part of the data analysis process (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). For the purpose of this study, the rigour of the data was enhanced by using diverse qualitative data-gathering methods – interviews, visual representations, focus groups and member checking, which facilitated understanding within the cultural context of the participants (Tindall, 1998). Various qualitative analysis methods were also used in the present study, namely thematic analysis, KWIC and the Mmogo-method^{TM} analysis – in a process known as crystallisation (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Ellingson, 2009). Crystallisation involves the use of multiple strategies to create a holistic picture of a specific phenomenon in such a way as to include the multiple representations presented by participants. This enables researchers to create more detailed, rich interpretations of data revealing different points of view and subtleties that could otherwise be overlooked. Drawing on different ways of expression, crystallisation allows "including, interweaving, blending" to discover the underlying meanings from different data sources (Ellingson, 2009, 11) and multiple constructed findings that reveal aspects of and relationships between phenomena on a deeper level than just contrasting findings from multi- and mixed methods. Table 1, below, has been adapted to show how these strategies were applied throughout the research process to enhance the rigour of the data.

Table 1: The principles and strategies for enhancing the rigour of the data through crystallisation

Principles	Strategies	Application in the research
Deepened	Data collection	The researchers used a variety of qualitative research methods including in-depth interviews, focus groups, member checking and a visual, culturally sensitive method – the Mmogo-method^{TM}. Throughout the interviews, they collected dense descriptions by probing for information through open

complex interpretations		questions, checking understanding from the participants, and explaining questions where this was requested. Interviews took place at the pace of the interviewee and were recorded using voice recorders.
	Member checking and the Mmogo-method[TM]	After the data collection and analyses, the researchers went back to a group of participants and talked about the findings – allowing them to reflect and comment on it and incorporate their inputs into the creation of themes. The Mmogo-method[TM] allows researchers to return the obtained information to the participants – the researchers do not draw their own conclusions but rely on the participants to clarify information.
Analyses	Multiple methods	Analysis methods included phenomenological analysis as suggested by Giorgi and Giorgi (2008), the key-words-in-context (KWIC) analysis of Fielding and Lee (1998), and Roos's (2008) analysis strategies for the Mmogo-method[TM].
	Dense descriptions	The researchers provided a dense description of our analysis methods and findings. These descriptions allow researchers to access rich data to create a holistic picture of the findings in a multiple-integrated manner thus sketching the realities of the participants.
	Paradigms	Contrasting findings as constructed themes and patterns allow researchers to interpret accounts to produce knowledge on

		multiple levels – mostly in line with constructivist and post-positivist perspectives. This does not exclude the concept of an objective reality but rather shows multiple ways of knowing about the phenomenon.
Genres of representation	Multiple texts	Data were collected as representations of different expressions –writing, visual art and conversations. Through the inclusion of multiple texts, researchers can combine, juxtapose and interweave accounts of the phenomenon in numerous ways to express the particular phenomenon in various ways.
Researcher reflections	Reflexivity	The researchers kept field notes in which they recorded their experience of the research process, their observations and their assumptions – forming an important part of being aware of their own ideas. Throughout the processes described, the researchers were encouraged to consider how their perceptions might influence the findings. By keeping track of emotions, observations and notes, researchers could evaluate any possible bias they had towards a particular finding or response. This made them conscious of their role as researchers and enabled them to demonstrate their integrity in realising how to convert possible problems into opportunities.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and the participants were told that they could withdraw at any time if they no longer wished to participate in the research and that there would be no negative consequences for them. The researchers conducted themselves professionally throughout and acted under supervision. The researchers ensured that they were competent in using the qualitative research techniques (Harrell & Bond, 2006) and also that all the participants participated in the research on the basis of fair, willing and informed consent. The participants were informed of any possible risks, benefits and limitations of their participation. All records were kept safe and treated as private and confidential within the supervisor-supervisee relationship. The translators also complied with these standards. The research processes and procedures were in line with the ethical codes of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) (http://www.hpcsa.co.za/conduct_rules.php) and with those of the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA). The research publication also adheres to the standards mentioned, especially regarding the agreement responsibilities of the participants and the researchers. Access to the community was arranged with the Centre Manager of the Day Care Centre for the Aged and a key member of the residential community. The researchers respected the gatekeepers' roles in their communities. The research team went to great lengths to ensure culturally sensitive and contextual research in an endeavour to understand older persons in this community. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, under "An exploration of enabling contexts (05K14)".

Results

The researchers constructed two main themes from their analysis of the data. Summarised in the table following are the main themes that emerged as well as the sub-themes underpinning these.

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes of the participants' experiences of loneliness

Themes	Sub-themes
Descriptions of loneliness	In relation to the self In relation to others

Coping with loneliness	Active engagement with the environment
	
	Being with other people to counter loneliness
	
	      Functions of engaging with others
	
	      Opportunities for engagement
	
	      Lack of interactions
	
	Strategies to cope with loneliness
	
	      Spirituality
	
	      Looking after animals
	
	      Humour

Descriptions of loneliness

Loneliness was described in relation to the self as well as in terms of the participants' relationships with others.

In relation to the self. In relation to the self, loneliness was described as an emotionally laden experience that influenced individuals' minds, health and outlook on life. Some of the participants compared it to a "*heart that aches*" because the "*heart is bleeding*". Loneliness is a faceless thing that strips people of their identity and, in itself, has no identity or recognisable facial features.

The older persons expressed surreal feelings when they felt lonely and said that loneliness affected their cognitive and physical functioning and wellbeing. In this regard, the participants reported that when

they were lonely, they felt like "*a lost person, you have feelings like the kind of life you are living is not*

real". They said that it "*disturbs the mind*" and that you could "*even fall sick*". One participant expressed

the feeling as, *"[w]hen you are lonely you find that your mind, it does not feel well, because you don't*

think properly, you don't even remember what you have been doing. You forget".

The participants mentioned how their physical health status contributed to their experiences of

loneliness and isolated them from others since, when they were in pain they "*cannot go anywhere*".

Others reported how they experienced the effects of loneliness on their health:

> *Loneliness causes sickness for you, because your heart sinks. It is not easy to forget in your*
>
> *heart. Loneliness gives your heart stress.*
>
> *Loneliness causes heart disease because when loneliness causes the heart – which is part of the*
>
> *body – to feel pain, the rest of your body doesn't feel well.*

In Figure 3, the participant shows a person lying down and unable to go anywhere − physical illness
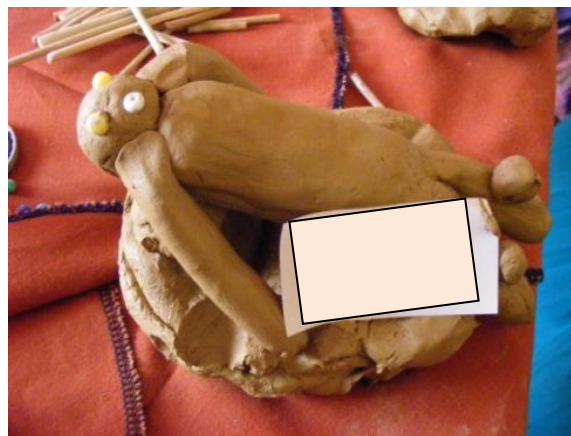
had immobilised her.

Figure 3: Sick person lying down

Loneliness was described in relation to the self as a concrete object with relational potential. The

relationship with loneliness taught the older persons what was causing their distress: "*Loneliness teaches*

you what is wrong. You have a specific dissatisfaction known to you, that a certain problem causes

dissatisfaction."

In line with what loneliness taught the older persons, they said that loneliness had the potential to stay

as an unwanted guest. They therefore warned that you should "*make sure that loneliness does not find a*

plek [place] to stay".

In relation to others. The older persons described their experiences of loneliness in relation to

others within their social context. One older woman said that loneliness was like "*being alone, an*

orphan". Orphan here refers to her lack of interaction with other people. According to one older person,

"*when you don't interact with people, not going to church you become lonely*".

In Figure 4, an older person depicts herself sitting alone isolated from others and from what is going

on around her. She is sitting and watching a cow inside a *kraal*. She reported that she felt depressed. She

watched what was going on around her but still sat alone. She felt separated from her surroundings and

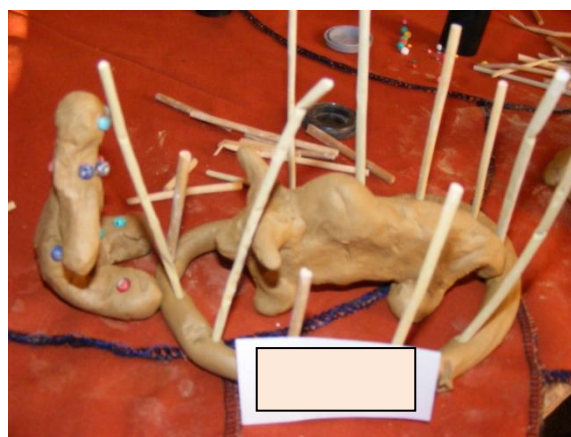felt especially lonely when she was experiencing pain.

Figure 4: Model of a figure sitting alone watching a cow

Relationships with others served as a strategy to shift the focus from the self to other people. The

individual's perspective was thus broadened from the self to other people. According to a participant: "*By*

focusing on your own life the whole time, you lose perspective that there are other people who also have

difficulties to deal with, and also experience loneliness." Other participants said that *"[if] you stay at home cleaning your house, you can get lonely because you are not getting fresh ideas from other people. You nurture old ideas".*

Coping with loneliness

Coping with loneliness was achieved on different levels by the participants such as engaging with their environment, being with others and God, and looking after animals. These were experiences that the older persons perceived as helping them overcome some of the obstacles that contributed to their loneliness.

Active engagement with the environment. In terms of active engagement with the environment, the older persons suggested that people should go out and engage in some activity: *"When you are alone, it's then that you feel the pain. The remedy is to go out and do something."* Also: *"You need to go out and engage in doing something. The remedy is to go out and do something."*

The participants said that their style of interaction determined their interaction with others: *"I'm involved, involve myself in everything where you can involve yourself"*; *"they actively go out and visit friends"*; *"making a choice to be active and having somebody to support them through the process"*.

Being with other people to counter loneliness. Being with other people was mentioned on different levels of the participants' lives and included their family, extended family, friends, and people from the church and the community centre. This created opportunities for the older persons to engage with other people.

Functions of engaging with others. The older persons' relationships with other people were described with regard to different functions. For some, it was the availability of people to talk to that helped them deal with loneliness. Thus, they did not distinguish their interaction with people in terms of closeness but in terms of the availability of other people:

If I am with someone chattering and laughing loneliness disappears.

Having someone to talk to can battle loneliness.

My children live with me. Now there is no loneliness.

The relationship with others is about sharing ideas.

Sharing ideas … emotions become relieved and it settles.

You have to keep your brain alive. Look, anything that you don't use, dies off.

There is always somebody to talk to.

Having conversations about the past also played a role in engaging with others: "*Have conversations about your lives and the past so that your spirits are relieved.*" It was important to be part of the group and to participate actively: "*I enjoyed participating in the conversations. While I was here I enjoyed being part of the group discussing loneliness.*"

Opportunities for engagement. Interactions in communal events extended from the church to their community and family events as can be seen from the following extracts. "*Weddings of family members that are wonderful also help a person not to feel lonely because there are talking, singing and dancing*"; "*Being part of significant events can also help a person to fight loneliness.*"

The older persons seemed to cope with loneliness by listening to the insights of other people and then applying these insights to their own understanding of loneliness. They believed that if they isolated themselves from others they were not utilising strategies to alleviate their loneliness. The older persons accordingly engaged on multiple levels – at centres or clubs, in friendships, with family and extended family members, and in cultural practices.

They interacted at clubs, societies and centres: "*She joined a women's club and did not feel lonely anymore*"; "*She attended society meetings*." Some of the participants attended the Day Care Centre for the Aged. They described their day as starting at home, making sure the grandchildren had food and were dressed for school and then, after accompanying the children to school, they went to the Day Care Centre

where they would do "*gardening with colleagues, as well as sharing ideas with each other, doing knitting and selling the goods made*".

Another part of this 'being together' were family and cultural meetings and traditions. Many of the participants in their representations portrayed traditional beer pots called *moritshana*. This formed an integral part of getting together to socialise and teach younger family members their traditions as illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Traditional practices – making beer and socialising

One participant reported as follows:

> *These are the things that help me cope with loneliness. They cheer me up and remind me of our traditions. Once a year we get together and socialise over making beer. The children join us and so we teach them about the traditions of their culture. Family help us cope with the challenges we face with ageing. The family help us when we are ill.*

> ***Lack of interaction.*** The importance of interpersonal relations was illustrated when the participants talked about the lack of interaction caused by people who had died, the absence of relationships due to carelessness and ignorance or children who had migrated to find job opportunities:

> *Sometimes when something happened and you expect someone to listen to you and what you saw and so on … you suddenly realise that person is not there … you have a sadness in you.*

I am missing his touch, I miss everything. A card which he brought me the very, very last birthday of mine [voice trails off]. *You think about those that have passed away. You think of how it was when they were still here … now that he is gone I am lonely, yes.*
Some children who do not care about you. Not being able to express your feelings to the children since they don't care. They don't have time to chat to you.

 Feeling needed by others was expressed as part of engaging with others without which the older persons experienced a lack of personal interaction causing them to miss out on "*visiting somebody and singing hymns to relieve emotions*" and experiencing that others "*need [them] in their lives*".

 Even if the older persons experienced physical discomfort, they wanted to feel needed because it helped them cope with the loneliness and the pain. Pain isolated people in addition to immobilising them. In Figure 7, the participant depicts her experience of pain due to the arthritis that caused her such discomfort that she preferred to be alone for a while to recover before she sought interaction with others:

> *I can then lie down until the worst passes, then I feel I can contribute more to the people around me than while I'm in pain. Then, when I'm among other people, I experienced that the pain and loneliness lifts away leaving me relieved.*
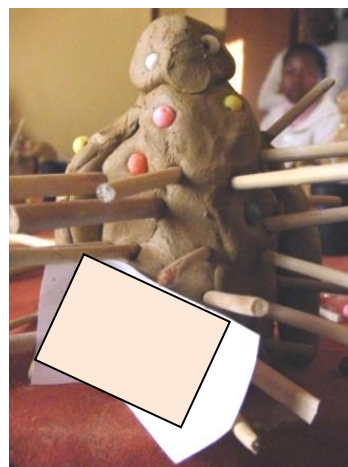

Figure 7: Person suffering from arthritis

Another example of how a female participant's physical limitations challenged her engaging with others was expressed in her loss of eyesight and how she embraced other means of engagement: "*I've lost my eyesight and I'm not used to it. I accept that I don't have my sight anymore*."

Strategies to cope with loneliness. Experiences of and coping with loneliness were stated as going hand in hand. The older persons shared how they coped with loneliness through spiritual practices, looking after animals, engaging with others and the environment, and using humour.

Spirituality. Religious practices were enthusiastically shared as being part of the participants' lives and their ability to cope with loneliness. They relied on having a relationship with God and church members to help them cope with loneliness and provide an avenue of active engagement with others. God was considered essential to their everyday lives and a constant factor throughout daily changes: "*When you heard a sermon it will be in your whole week*" and "*If you know God there's no loneliness because you'll be with someone you're staying with*" and "*People cannot fill the gap left by the absence of God*" and "*God is always with you.*"

The participants reported how religious practices helped them cope with loneliness: "*Reading the Bible and singing. Reading the Bible, you feel these words are healing you*". One participant mentioned that she had "*a small book in which I write meaningful messages in that I hear at church and then read it back at home when I feel lonely*".

People from the church community often consoled them – when they experienced stress, the participants had peace of mind knowing that somebody [church friends] would be available for them to talk to and to share their burdens. If there wasn't anybody to talk to, they would "*spend their time in Bible study*" and "*being part of a music group, praise helped them to connect with the Lord*". Friends in the church were important to the participants to "*mix with other people and be closer to God*" and "*by going to church … as well as funerals. Relying on meeting your friend at church*".

Looking after animals. The participants also kept busy by looking after animals − if they did not have any animals to look after, they felt lonely and remembered the times they did have animals.

Animals contributed to the independence of the older persons. The participants said they appreciated animals since they "*provided them with milk so that they need not buy any*" and "*cattle rearing allowed me to keep busy and in the late afternoon they were taken back to the kraal*". Another participant reported:

> *I lived an African life and used my cattle to plough. I used to ride on a horse for journeys and visited places like Johannesburg* [180 km from Ikageng]. *Cattle and sheep are also used for meat. The children are no longer interested in livestock. My animals wait for me in the kraal. I look after my animals and make sure they are not sick. I don't feel lonely while I take care of them and I tell my children how important these animals are.*

Having a pet to look after made some of the participants happy: "*The dog is eating food and I enjoy looking at it while it is eating and this made me happy.*"

Humour. The older persons used humour to engage with the others to "*chase away loneliness*". One participant talked about an old blind man and his dog, which used to make her laugh a lot. When she was lonely, she thought of this old man shouting and using his stick around him, and she laughed. The old man didn't feel lonely with his dog. This older woman employed humour as a strategy to shift the focus from herself to others in order to deal with her loneliness. Another participant said: "*Talking, passing jokes, laughing. When you do this you forget all sorts of things that make you lonely and you become happy again.*"

Discussion

The Batswana people in the study expressed loneliness vividly although they regarded it as a painful experience. For them, there was a link between the emotions they experienced as loneliness and their

physical health, which is also confirmed in the literature (Mudege & Ezeh, 2009; Holmén & Furukawa, 2002). The thoughts and feelings associated with loneliness extended to the rest of the body, which affected the mind and was perceived as a vicious cycle of negative feedback. Which for this group of older persons is the reason why loneliness should be combated and not allowed to become part of their lives.

The older persons experienced loneliness in relation to themselves and to others and their surroundings. They said they experienced loneliness when they were isolated from others or their surroundings, which is also confirmed in the literature on isolation and loneliness (De Jong-Gierveld, Van Tilburg & Dykstra, 2006; Pirkko et al., 2006; Savviko et al., 2005). Some of the factors that contributed to their isolation from others were ill health, their attitude to their emotional and physical condition, and their ability or inability to engage with their environment (Aboderin, 2005).

The present study contributed to an understanding of loneliness as a result of a lack of social engagement and interaction. This formed part of an all-encompassing theme that emerged from the research in terms of how the older persons expressed loneliness as a dimension of their social embeddedness. Victor, Scambler and Bond (2009) point out that social embeddedness refers to the degree of people's social involvement and the meanings people attach to relationships. These authors argue that older persons rely on members of social networks to provide them with the support they need. This study highlighted the importance of engagement in meaningful interactions with others and the environment, which are also well documented as conditions that contribute to experiences of loneliness (De Jong-Gierveld, Van Tilburg & Dykstra, 2006; Victor, Scambler, Bond & Bowling, 2005).

The older Batswana persons' experiences and descriptions of loneliness were expressed as a discord of social embeddedness. Loneliness ensued if they did not engage in meaningful relationships with others and their environment. The older persons in the study identified different people from different contexts

with whom they interacted – family, extended family, friends, the church and peers. These relationships served different functions and revealed a unique perspective on the multi-layered social experiences of loneliness.

The solution the older persons proposed to cope with loneliness was to interact with others and their surroundings as a way to introduce other people's ideas to their lives. This links up with the views of Victor and Scharf (2005) who highlighted the importance of social relationships and engagements with others. These older persons believed that in order to combat loneliness, the focus should be on other persons and not on themselves, which is in line with the worldview of *ubuntu* (Mkhize, 2004). In this research, the active seeking of engagement with others and the environment could be regarded as '*ubuntu in action*'. In other words, the older persons experienced loneliness and dealt with it through their relatedness to others: I am lonely because we are not in a relationship; and I am not lonely because we are in a relationship.

Social strategies to combat loneliness were expressed as a constant interaction of being with others, animals as engaging in strategies to cope with loneliness. Some coping strategies are well known in the literature such as looking after others and animals, and relying on religion and humour (Lazarus, 2000; De Jong-Gierveld, Van Tilburg & Dykstra, 2006; De Jong-Gierveld & Dykstra, 2008).

Church attendance and fellowship allowed the older persons to engage with others, to receive support, to provide support to others and to engage in praise and worship through singing, dancing, praying and writing down meaningful messages when they were not with church friends (Victor, Scambler & Bond, 2009; Davidson, Warren & Maynard, 2005). The older persons said that their relationship with God was of great importance in their coping with loneliness, which is also in line with the findings of Davidson, Warren and Mynard (2005). Church friends opened a special avenue of engagement that allowed them to share spiritual experiences with each other and support each other in faith. In terms of faith and

bereavement, the findings confirmed those of Speck, Bennett, Coleman, Mills, McKiernan, Smith and Hughes (2005), that is, that older persons could provide support for each other in times of grief and that they could not have "coped without it" (p. 150). The church thus permitted the participants to share commonalities such as the same religion and also let them express their cultural practices. Weddings and funerals among Batswana are community and church events that bring people together to share experiences (Oppong, 2006).

Other cultural practices that bound the older persons together within their contexts included looking after extended family members, participating in family gatherings, making traditional beer and socialising with peers (for similar findings see Bohman, Vasuthevan, Van Wyk and Ekman, 2007; Davidson, Warren & Maynard, 2005). Social and cultural practices and traditions seemed to anchor the older persons to each other and their environment thus adding to the importance of being socially embedded within their cultural and social systems.

The older persons in the Ikageng community actively sought interaction with others for different functions and during different opportunities. The functions for engagement seemed to be linked to the multi-layeredness of loneliness and the levels on which it was experienced. The interactions they sought were based on the availability of people to talk to and to assist them in dealing with loneliness. This may go beyond the social embeddedness described by Victor, Scambler and Bond (2009) as an involving meaningful relationship and extend to what the present study showed to be a hand-in-hand coping mechanism in which the older persons identified situations or contributory factors to loneliness and actively sought engagements with people that could relieve specific situations.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

These findings are limited to the Setswana-speaking older persons in Ikageng, Potchefstroom, South Africa. From a phenomenological perspective, their experiences were unique although

commonalities might be shared with other collectivistic cultures with a similar background. As the self among others is not an identity easily recognised in Western theories, we can only speculate on the findings and in the future wish to broaden the theoretical base for the interpretation of findings from African and collectivistic perspectives. Although extensive studies have been done on loneliness, we hope to engage in future research on this phenomenon as understood and experienced from a collectivistic, culturally and socially embedded interactive perspective and thus understand loneliness and other ageing phenomena from the multiple layers of connectedness between people.

Conclusion

Loneliness is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that Batswana people experience on many levels of engagement and disengagement from the self and others. They experience challenges that contribute to their loneliness and engage in active strategies to cope with it. This study showed that different activities, engagements, traditions and cultural practices helped the older persons combat their experiences of loneliness.

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