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Exploring blog narratives of parental loneliness: A thematic network analysis

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ABSTRACT

UK-based national surveys and international longitudinal studies have shown that around a third of parents experience chronic or persistent loneliness. There is limited research about the experience of loneliness in parenthood, however blogs authored by parents, sharing their personal experiences about loneliness offer a potential rich data source. The purpose of this study was to identify and analyse blog narratives written by parents who had experienced loneliness to increase understanding of their experiences. One hundred and ninety-six relevant blog posts were identified, of which 157 had contact details to request permission to use the blog post in the study. Twenty-two parent bloggers gave their permission. Thematic network analysis was used to open code the blogs and 4 organising themes and subthemes emerged, which centred on a global theme of disconnection. Disconnection underpinned themes relating to a sense that being a parent was overwhelming, changes in identity linked to becoming a parent, difficulties in sharing feelings of loneliness with others, and a need for social connection. Findings point to parents being unprepared for the transition to parenthood, with implications for perinatal education and support, including further opportunities for parents to connect to reduce social isolation.

Introduction

While becoming a parent is a source of great joy, many parents can experience it as an upheaval as they adjust to their new role and responsibilities. The transition to parenthood involves fundamental changes to relationships, social networks, careers, values and routines (Nelson, 2003; Chin et al., 2011; Prinds et al., 2014). A UK-based national survey found that around a third of parents report feeling lonely often or always (Action for Children, 2017). Similar rates were also found in a trajectory study conducted in Finland in which around 30 % of parents scored consistently high on a loneliness scale (Luoma et al., 2019). The prevalence of loneliness appears to be particularly heightened in younger parents; a UK-based national survey in 2018 by Co-operative and British Red Cross revealed 82 % of mums under 30 feel lonely sometimes (49 % feeling lonely often or always) (Cooperative, 2018). Although there have been no direct comparisons between parent

and non-parent cohorts, these figures of high loneliness in parent cohorts contrast with prevalence of high loneliness found in general population surveys which typically range between 10 and 15 % (Beutel et al., 2017; Surkalim et al., 2022; Van der Velden et al., 2021).

Loneliness is defined as a negative emotional state that arises when people perceive that there is a discrepancy between their desired and actual social relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Loneliness and social isolation reflect related but distinct social conditions (Van Baarsen et al., 2001). Social isolation typically refers to objective physical separation from other people, such as living alone or residing in a rural geographic area. Loneliness, in contrast, refers to the more subjective feeling state of being alone, separated, or apart from others, which can be experienced regardless of the size of a person's social network. In qualitative research these terms are often used interchangeably when people describe their lonely experiences, with participants often describing a feeling of loneliness because of actual or perceived isolation

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from others. For example, in one interview study (Lever-Taylor et al., 2021) with women with perinatal depression, when asked about their experiences of loneliness they described feeling lost, alone, and isolated. They linked these feelings to lack of supportive relationships, fears of judgement and disconnection from their previous lives and identities since becoming a parent (Lever-Taylor et al., 2021).

There is a plethora of research in adult populations that has found associations between loneliness and social isolation with poor mental and physical health (Wang et al., 2018; Ong et al., 2016) and early mortality (Gerst-Emerson & Jayawardhana, 2015). Much of the evidence base for health impacts is in undergraduate or elderly populations, but links between loneliness and postnatal depression and stress are being made in an emerging literature on parental loneliness. This research has found that loneliness is higher or more frequent in mothers with depression (Badaru et al., 2013; Zaidi et al., 2017) and antenatal loneliness is predictive of postnatal depression (Kruse et al., 2014). Associations between loneliness and parenting stress and distress (Au et al., 2008; Berry and Jones, 1995) have also been demonstrated.

Parental loneliness is cause for concern as evidence indicates that loneliness not only impacts parents' health and well-being but also has negative implications for child's health outcomes. Intergenerational transmission of the experience of loneliness is evident with associations between parent loneliness and child social and emotional loneliness (Junttila & Vauras, 2009), particularly between the mother and their children (Van Roekel et al., 2010). Although a recent study has shown a gendered effect: father's loneliness was predictive of their son's persistent loneliness and mother's loneliness predictive of their daughters (Salo et al., 2020). Parental loneliness has also been linked to children's developmental outcomes. Mothers' feelings of loneliness have been associated with their child's poorer problem-solving skills (Alvik, 2014), internalising problems (Al-Yagon, 2007; Luoma et al., 2019), poor social competence, hostility, and fear of negative evaluation (Zafar & Kausar, 2015) and social anxiety (in girls only; Stednitz & Epkins, 2006). Both mothers and fathers' feelings of loneliness are associated with lower peer ratings of social skills in their daughters (Junttila & Vauras, 2009).

A recent scoping review (Nowland et al., 2021) identified a lack of research for parents' perspectives about their lived experience of loneliness. There were some qualitative papers relating to parenting experiences where loneliness and social isolation were discussed or emerged as a latent theme, but these were typically conducted with young mothers and/or with parents with children with chronic illnesses or disabilities (Nowland et al., 2021). Insights from the scoping review (Nowland et al., 2021) also indicated that parental loneliness may be different to loneliness experienced in other cohorts. Few studies have compared the experience of loneliness in parents to loneliness in non-parents. Where this has been examined parents have been shown to be less likely to experience loneliness alongside perceived isolation and alienation than non-parents, thus parents are more likely attribute their experience of their loneliness to their own personal inadequacies (i.e. mistrust or low self-esteem, Rokach, 2005; 2007).

In recent years there has been a proliferation of the use of online blogs to share experiences and gain social support with others in similar situations, with numbers of blogs globally estimated to exceed 600 million (GrowthBadger, 2022). Blogs are a regularly updated website or web page, that is written in an informal or conversational style. Personal blogs are similar to 'private online journals' (Barlow, 2007, p. 15) and concern personal, day-to-day, and even intimate issues relating to bloggers' private lives (Herring et al., 2004; Hollenbaugh, 2011). Blogs enable people to write more openly and candidly about their lives, and share their faults, mishaps, or other intimate details that might be difficult to express in other media (Hookway, 2008; Kotliar, 2015). Accordingly, the contents of personal blogs tend to be characterised by reflective, introspective, descriptive, interpretive and exploratory content and therefore align with common qualitative methodologies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Gill, Nowson, & Oberlander, 2009). As such blogs have potential as a qualitative health research tool for a range of

purposes, including data collection (Wilson et al., 2015).

There are a number of blog posts that have been written by parents about their experiences of loneliness, but to date there has been no synthesis or analysis of the data. We considered that a thematic analysis of these blog posts would address the gap in the literature for a qualitative examination of parents' experiences to help deepen our understanding of how parents experience loneliness, its causes and consequences and meanings parents associate with it. We included blog posts that discussed loneliness and/or social isolation because qualitative research shows that people often use these terms interchangeably when describing experiences of loneliness (Lever-Taylor et al., 2021). A further aim was to use this evidence to help identify suitable strategies and interventions to help tackle the high prevalence of loneliness in this population.

The current study

The current study aimed to explore parents' experiences of loneliness via analysis of online blog posts. Thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) was used to analyse the narratives to summarise the main themes, and highlight patterns in understanding by presenting them as a thematic network. Using this analysis we aimed to answer the following questions:

- How do parents describe their experiences of loneliness in online blog posts?
- What factors do parents associate with the experience of loneliness in online blog posts?
- What solutions and services are suggested by parents who have written blog posts to combat loneliness?

Methods

Search strategy & selection criteria

Relevant blog posts were obtained by searching Google, Yahoo, Google blog and Technorati using the following search terms: 'loneliness', 'lonely', 'parent', 'mother', 'father', 'mum', 'dad', 'mom', 'isolated', 'isolation'. Google searches were conducted by two authors independently to allow for potential differences in search results and all available results were screened. Yahoo, Google blog and Technorati were searched by one author (with the first 500 hits for yahoo screened). The following blog specific websites - Wordpress and Blogspot - were also searched for relevant blogs and alerts set up to capture any new blog posts published following the searches. Blog posts were included if they were written by parents and discussed their attitudes, opinions, and experiences of loneliness and/or social isolation. To avoid making assumptions about parents' experiences, a definition of loneliness and social isolation was not applied and all blog posts were included where authors described their experiences as loneliness or social isolation. Parents did not always report the ages of their children and/or other specific details about their child or their circumstances, so we were unable to consider wider contextual information when analysing the data.

Following the initial screening and searching all duplicates were removed and two raters independently screened relevant blog posts using the inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1).

Ethics and consent process

Local University ethical approval for the study was granted (HEALTH 0049). In accordance with local university ethical procedures, despite the blogs being in the public domain, it was considered necessary to obtain written consent from bloggers to include their posts in the research study. The consent process included sending a participant information sheet including full details of the study and its purpose to all

Table 1
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.

Inclusion	Exclusion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blog/blog post written from personal perspective • Written by parents about their own experiences • Main topic of blog post is loneliness and/or social isolation • Published in the last 10 years • Written in English language • Blogs written about parent perspectives where the child is under 16 years old and living at home • Blogs from people who are co-parenting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information-based blogs with no personal perspective • Blog posts about loneliness relating to adult children (i.e., leaving home) • Written in languages other than English • Blog posts focusing on loneliness in pregnancy, prenatal and neonatal hospital care

bloggers where contact details were provided. The consent form also asked the blogger to indicate whether they agreed for their blog (including the weblink) to be cited in the write up of the study findings – if not, they were notified that their extracts would be paraphrased so they could not be identifiable.

Data extraction

Bloggers who had provided contact details on their blogs or blog-posts were contacted using available contact details (i.e. email, Facebook page, contact form etc.). Once permission to include the blog post/s was sought two coders read through each of the blogs and extracted data (where available) relating to gender, age, number and age of children, country of residence, marital status, whether the parent identifies as a single parent and the date the blog post was published online.

Analysis

Thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) was used. Thematic network analysis is a robust and highly sensitive tool for the systematization and presentation of qualitative analyses, offering a sensitive, insightful, and rich exploration of overt structures and underlying patterns (Attride-Stirling, 2001). This approach involves organising the information into: (i) lowest-order premises (Basic Themes); (ii) grouping the themes to summarize more abstract principles (Organising Themes); and (iii) using super-ordinate (Global Themes) that encapsulate the principal metaphors of the data set as a whole. The three levels of themes are then represented as web-like maps to illustrate the relationships between them.

Only the blog post narrative (rather than any other comments or links included in the blogs) was used as data for analysis. Where the blog post included poetry written by the blogger, this was included. A reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2019) was taken to explore and understand the meaning-based patterns across the dataset to provide a coherent and compelling interpretation, grounded in the data. The process of coding was flexible to encapsulate the growing conceptualisation of the data.

Basic themes were determined from the data using inductive coding. To identify basic themes each blog post was read and reread by two coders independently and emerging concepts labelled and grouped. Sections of text relating to specific codes or concepts were extracted and grouped in excel independently by each coder who then meet to discuss their coding of the blog posts. Basic themes were then refined in discussion between the two coders, returning to the blog posts for clarity if needed, to develop a coding framework. Decisions at this stage were based around whether the themes were “specific enough to be discrete (i.e. non-repetitive) and broad enough to encapsulate a set of ideas contained in the numerous text segments” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p392). The resulting framework was applied across the blog posts by one

of the coders and sense-checked by the other coder.

These basic themes were then clustered based on larger shared ideas, into organizing themes. A further analysis conducted by the two coders in dialogue and collaboratively of the organizing themes, allowed for the creation of a global theme making sense of the data as a whole. As such the global theme summarises the main proposition or argument that the organising are about: the core, principal metaphor that encapsulates the main point in the text. Once the basic, organising and global theme were developed these were illustrated as a thematic network (a non-hierarchical, web-like representation; Attride-Stirling, 2001, p393). The thematic network and descriptions of themes were discussed and developed with the wider research team.

Results

The searching and selection process for selected blog posts is displayed in Fig. 1. Searches were conducted from October 2019 to January 2020, with alerts for new blog posts up to March 2020. Searches revealed 196 blog posts that were relevant at the time of searching, of these only 157 provided contact details and 4 blogs had been removed since searches were conducted and not available for retrieval of contents. Of the 157, only 22 bloggers responded to provide consent. Generally the blogs that relevant blog posts were retrieved were about their parenting experiences or general life style blogs. Each blogger included had wrote one blog post on loneliness, except for two of these parents who wrote two blog posts each about their experiences of loneliness (#11 and #14); with each blog page noted with a different letter (i.e. 11a, 11b). None of the bloggers contacted asked for their blog posts to not be used; 135 did not reply.

Table 2 provides information about the bloggers and their children that was available. All 24 blog posts were published between September 2013 and December 2019. All but one of the included blogs were written by mothers, only six noted their age. Most blogs were written by parents in the UK, Wales, and Ireland, four were from USA and one from Australia. The ages of children varied across the included blogs, with nine parents reporting having children under three. At the time of writing the blog post, four of the mothers self-identified as single parents. A full list of the title of the blogs and associated URLs is provided in Supplementary File 1.

Thematic analysis

The global theme was ‘disconnection’ which underpinned four organising themes (and associated basic themes) that described how parents felt disconnected from the *outside* world by the overwhelming nature of being a parent, how they struggled with changes in identity linked to their new parenting role, experiencing difficulties in sharing how they were feeling with others, and a lack of social connection. All of which contributed to feelings of loneliness and a sense of social isolation.

Fig. 2 displays the thematic network with the global and organising themes.

Being a parent is overwhelming

In this organising theme, disconnection was felt in the overwhelming experience of transitioning to parenthood. Three basic themes describe how parents expressed a desire to get things right and be a good parent but felt overcome by the ‘weight of responsibility’. The desire to be perceived as a good parent despite feeling challenged by parenthood led to a sense of disconnection with others, feeling alone in this responsibility to *get it right*. ‘Changing pace and priorities as a culture shock’ highlights how parenthood was marked by a change in pace of life and parents felt that they had to get used to a ‘new normal’ of feeling tired and sleep-deprived – experiences which were often an unexpected part of new parenthood. Parents often described a sense of disconnection from their previous lives and that life was continuing without them.

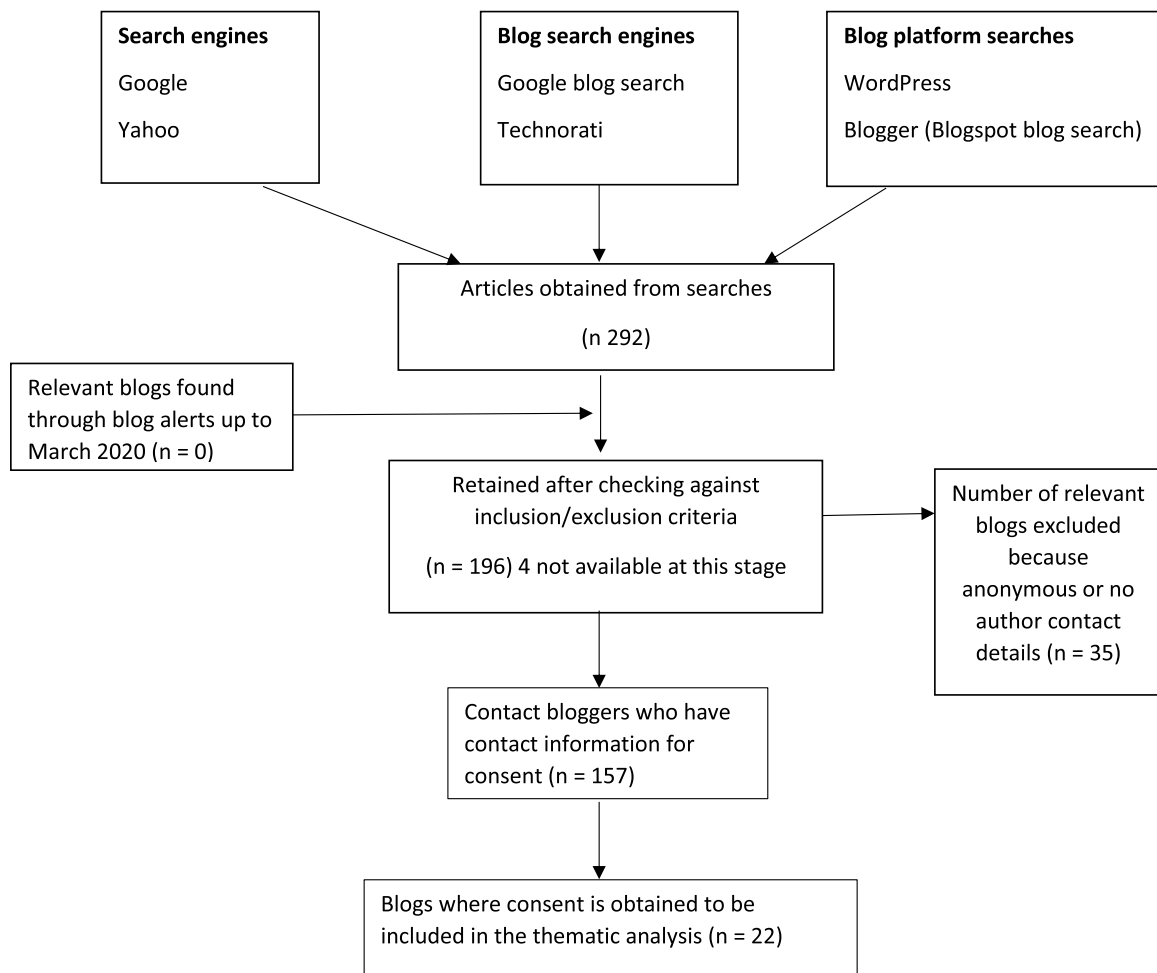


Fig. 1. Flow chart of Blog search and selection process.

Table 2

Bloggers demographic information noted in the blogs/blog posts.

ID	Gender	Age of parent	Age of children	Number of children	Country of residence	Marital status	Single parent	Date blog posted
1	Female	37		3		Married	No	02/06/2019
2	Female			3	Ireland	Married	No	21/09/2013
3	Female				USA		No	
4	Female	30 something		2	UK (Wales)	Married	No	03/02/2019
5	Female		8, 5 and a baby#	3	UK	Married	No	13/02/2017
6	Female			1	UK	Married	No	20/10/2019
7	Male		10 and 7	2	UK	Married	No	23/07/2019
8	Female		17, 3	3	UK	Married	No	11/10/2017
9	Female	young mum	2	1	UK		Yes	29/08/2019
10	Female	30 something	2	1	UK		Yes	10/09/2018
11	Female		3 year old, 12 weeks	2	UK	Engaged	No	07/12/2019
12	Female	30	3 and baby	2	UK	Married	No	06/02/2019
13	Female			2			yes	25/04/2017
14	Female			4	UK	Married	no	15/02/2019
15	Female	41	11 month	1	UK		Yes	01/01/2019
16	Female		1	1	UK	Partner	No	19/09/2019
17	Female		Young adults*	2	USA			10/03/2016
18	Female		2.5	3	USA	Married	No	07/09/2014
19	Female			3	UK	Partner	No	12/02/2018
20	Female			2	Australia	Partner	No	09/02/2017
21	Female		Under 1	1	USA	Married	No	10/11/2019
22	Female		6,4	2	UK	Married	No	24/11/2018

* this blog is retained despite the blogger noting her children are young adults as she reflects on her experiences of loneliness when the children were infants, # reported as a baby, no age disclosed.

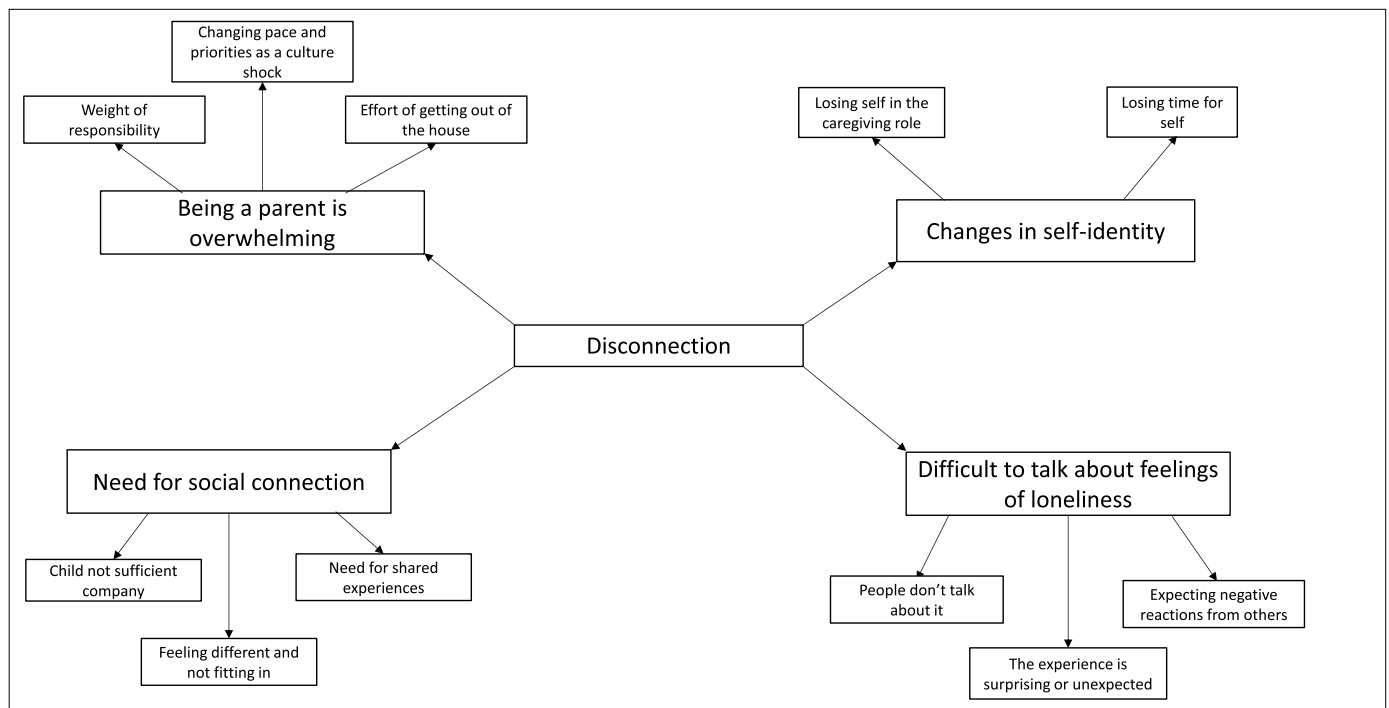


Fig. 2. Thematic network.

‘Getting out of the house’ was perceived as a positive strategy to overcome isolation and loneliness but the efforts to do this with a young child meant that it rarely occurred and furthered their sense of disconnection.

Weight of responsibility

Parents discussed feeling overwhelmed by the responsibilities of having to care for a small infant:

“Motherhood can be lonely. Especially the first time. When you don’t know anything much, and you’re overwhelmed by this small, soft, wriggling being for whom you have suddenly become responsible.” (Blogger 2)

The perceived weight of this responsibility often compounded by parents feeling a need to get things “right” and have the “picture perfect baby and life” (Blogger 4):

Being unable to share the burden increased the sense of responsibility for single parents, who felt that they “can’t split the duties with anyone” (Blogger 13):

“But the isolation single mothers feel is different. You go from having a home with two parents helping to raise the kids, to having one parent who is responsible for everything. Suddenly there is no other parent to give you air when you need it. Or help take the burden off you by helping out with the kids.” (Blogger 13)

However, even those who were in relationships expressed an overwhelming sense of accountability for caregiving when their partner was at work; “It can be a lonely job, being in charge all the time” (Blogger 6)

Changing pace and priorities as a culture shock

Common in parents’ reflections was the slowness of parenthood. They expressed a change from a “fast-paced” world to one that “was standing still” (Blogger 1). This change in pace was felt by some as a “culture shock” (Blogger 3). This sense of life standing still coupled with a shift in their priorities, led some to feel that the world was still carrying on without them, furthering their feelings of disconnection from their former lives:

“When you have a child all of a sudden your priorities change. Your mind is taken up with baby related stuff and your whole world stands still while you get your head round it all. But around you, the rest of the world keeps moving.” (Blogger 5)

This was echoed by other bloggers who spoke of the need to reprioritise the caregiving role to be the most important:

“We place our loneliness aside. Again. We save making our mom village for another day. Again. We put our kids and family ahead of ourselves. Again. After all, that’s what any good mom would do, right? So we plug along day after day, hearts longing for connection, heads unable to find the time to create it.” (Blogger 21)

Often parents discussed how their experience of parenting was not as expected, with some noting their baby cried a lot and they were not getting much sleep. Tiredness and its impacts on parenting were frequently discussed:

“When your baby doesn’t nap like the book said babies should. When you try to transfer her to the basket asleep but she wakes up every time. Every single time. When your baby cries a lot. All evening. And you don’t know why. You feed and rock and feed and rock, watching the clock. When you try putting her down awake as the parenting experts advise, but she cries.” (Blogger 2)

Other parents talked about feeling “stuck in groundhog day” (Blogger 5) due to completing repetitive tasks over and over:

“I became engulfed in loneliness and my days started to feel like they were stuck on repeat. I’d wake up, feed both kids, tidy up, play, feed both kids again and play some more until bedtime just to wake up the next morning to do the exact same thing over again. I felt so unhappy. My loneliness was turning to sadness and it was taking me to a dark place. (Blogger 11a)

Effort of getting out of the house

While parents believed that getting out of the house was an important factor in overcoming isolation and to help with feelings of loneliness, it was seen as an “insurmountable task, the Everest of daily

challenges” (Blogger 2), involving great organisation and scheduling, and trying to avoid forgetting important items “so that we survive the day/avoid significant social embarrassment” (Blogger 6).

For a few parents, loneliness was acutely experienced when their child was sick as this resulted in them being “clingly” making getting out of the house even more difficult:

“After five days with a poorly, clingy child it starts to get to you. Obviously she is my main concern and her health is the most important thing, but after watching others visit, come and go, even my husband being able to leave for work, knowing he can do what he wants whilst he’s out, talk to who he wants, sometimes it wears you down. And today, I was at the end of my tether.” (Blogger 4)

Some parents also expressed challenges in doing things with their baby in tow, and when coupled with difficulties in preparing to go outside, this could lead to them feeling that “staying at home seemed to be the easy option.” (Blogger 11a)

Differences between men and women and the effort to leave the house were highlighted by one mother as a source of frustration, relating to how easy it was for her partner to leave the house (typically for work) compared to what it was like leaving the home with their child:

“My other half goes to work, ok he may have to walk the dogs before he goes sometimes, but apart from that, he just goes. He doesn’t have to worry about getting someone else ready, he’s not governed by nursery opening and closing times or nap times or the toilet trips that happen 300 times a day.” (Blogger 4)

Getting out of the house was seen as a way to reconnect with others and overcome loneliness and isolation, and about being a good parent. Some referred to how not going out created a sense of self-blame for not being a “better mum” and doing activities with their child:

“And it’s slowly making me go out of my mind. With boredom. With frustration. With annoyance at myself for not being a better mum, for not taking Benjamin out and doing more things with him while I have the chance.” (Blogger 8)

The tension of wanting connection versus their experience of feeling stuck in the house left some parents feeling isolated, lonely, and helpless. But one parent commented about how getting out of the house was a lifeline for her to overcome the feelings of loneliness:

“Getting out of the house and spending time with other people can stop all the days just rolling into one another. One of the best things I did very early on in my days as a new mum was to drag my post pregnancy backside out of the house and go to my first ever mum and baby group.” (Blogger 5)

Changes in self-identity

In this organising theme disconnection was experienced in relation to a loss of self-identity. Two basic themes discuss how parents felt they were ‘losing self in the caregiving role’, and ‘losing time for self’, linked to having a new purpose in life that was centred around someone else. A loss of self-hood led to feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Losing self in the caregiving role

Parents, whilst often expressing how they were happy and content with becoming a parent, felt that something of themselves had been lost in their new identity:

“So much of what is important to you gets pushed way back when you’re so focused on raising a tiny human, that you forget that while being a mom is the most important thing in your life, and it changes you to the core; you are more than just someone’s mother.” (Blogger 3)

For some, this was centred around the need or desire to be a stay-at-

home mother or having given up work. They described how their work identity had become lost alongside the social connections and adult company associated with that role:

“The thing is, I like having a job. It gives me a sense of purpose, it gets me out of the house, and it guarantees at least some level of human interaction on a daily basis. In the end, however, I had to make the difficult decision to stay at home, to hand my notice in and turn my back on a job which maybe wasn’t incredible, but was something just for me.” (Blogger 8)

For one mother this change in identity was accompanied with physical changes – not recognising who she had become:

“Being a mum of two means I have even less time for myself than I did before, which means even less time to socialise or even less time for anything else at all to be honest! I would look in the mirror at myself, see the bags under my eyes, the pale skin and greasy hair and I wouldn’t even recognise myself.” (Blogger 11a)

Losing time for self

For some parents, the fact that they had less time for themselves due to their altered identity was described with a sense of loss of what they once had and craving for things to be different:

“You’re your children’s world and they’ll fight to get your attention at every moment. If they don’t want your attention, then they need you to help them with 5 million things. You desperately want time alone where you aren’t needed every second of the day.” (Blogger 12)

Restricted time due to caregiving created problems in parents forming connections, such as ‘mom friends’, despite knowing that this would help them to overcome their newfound sense of disconnection:

“You’re so focused on your precious littles that sometimes there isn’t time for much else. Between the feeding, changing, playing and everything else that goes into being a mom how do you find time to make mom friends? How do you find a “village”? I know for me the answer is I haven’t had time. I want the time. I want the village. But honestly the day to day of mom life exhausts me to the point of pushing my wants and desires to the back burner, settling for the few hours of alone time I get between my husband coming home from work and bedtime.” (Blogger 21)

Some parents found ways to overcome this by taking time back for their selves and stressed this as important to regain their identity, and to overcome feelings of loneliness:

“I’m not ashamed to admit that I struggled with being lonely and stir-crazy for a lot of my stay-at-home days. I’ve found that it is important for me to retain a little bit of who I am as a person, even if it feels selfish. Additionally, you will be a better mom for prioritizing just a few quiet moments for yourself. You’re you. And you’re great. And you deserve more than to feel like you’re just a butt wiping machine.” (Blogger 3)

Difficult to talk about feelings of loneliness

In this organising theme three basic themes describe how disconnection was associated with parents feeling that they could not share their experiences of loneliness with others. ‘The experience is surprising or unexpected’ discusses how parents were surprised about feeling lonely after having a child which led to confusion and disbelief about the experience. ‘People do not talk about it’ highlights parents views about the silence surrounding loneliness and how they lacked the words to describe it. The final theme ‘Expecting negative reactions from others’ concerns how persisting feelings of loneliness could instil guilt and parents being unable to disclose their feelings due to fears of being

disbelieved, being perceived as ungrateful or reprisals.

The experience is surprising or unexpected

For several parents, the experience of loneliness was a surprising and unexpected one:

"I feel like I was ready, well as ready as one can be, for the sleepless nights, the feedings and the constant need a baby needs, but the word loneliness and motherhood never went together in my head prior to having children" (Blogger 1)

Particularly surprising, was why they felt lonely as they had their baby, who needed them, for company:

"I couldn't work out how I could feel so lonely when I was outnumbered by two (very much wanted and loved!) little people all day, every day." (Blogger 20)

People do not talk about it

Some parents mentioned having difficulties telling others about their experience because they found it difficult to find words to describe it:

"Loneliness does not come from having no people around you, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to you." -Carl Jung. Want to know why it hits home? Because I can't even explain why it hits home." (Blogger 3)

Others felt it was difficult to communicate their feelings because "*no one really talks about it*" (Blogger 9 and 11a).

There was an awareness that sharing their feelings of loneliness with others would help them, but not all parents felt able to do this. Some expressed that "*it's hard to admit to feeling lonely*" (Blogger 11b) and others felt that they had to hide their feelings of loneliness:

"the biggest mistake I made in trying to deal with my loneliness was that I didn't try to deal with it at all, all I did was try to masquerade how I was feeling and I never expressed it to anyone until one day the overwhelming feeling of loneliness took over me and I just couldn't keep it to myself anymore." (Blogger 11a)

Expecting negative reactions from others

Some of the bloggers felt they would be perceived as ungrateful or not enjoying being a parent if they talked about how they were feeling:

"Most people have the idea (including our hardworking work outside the home spouses) that staying at home is a piece of cake. (Be honest, when was the last time you got to sit and eat your food while it was still hot? Never. The answer is never.) So explaining that you're lonely will either make people think you're not grateful, or that you just don't enjoy being a mom; neither of which is true." (Blogger 3)

When parents were discussing their experiences of loneliness in their blogs this was often followed by a statement that they were grateful for having a child, or that they enjoyed their time shared with their child. For example, Blogger 12 reported:

"Don't get me wrong, I regret absolutely nothing when I look at my beautiful boys, and they make me so happy and proud every day. But sometimes you feel completely alone." (Blogger 12)

Need for social connection

In this final organising theme, three basic themes detail parents' needs for social connection. The first theme 'child not sufficient company' considers how disconnection was related to the child's presence or absence; some felt a sense of being alone despite being with the child, and others felt this more acutely at bedtime when their child was asleep. The 'need for shared experiences' describes parents' views on the importance of shared experiences to feel socially connected and stressed

the importance of knowing you are not alone. The final basic theme, 'feeling different and not fitting in' outlines how for some parents, adult company was avoided because they felt were different to other parents in specific ways.

Child not sufficient company

Parents talked about feeling lonely due to "*the constant company of just your child*" (Blogger 4), a feeling that was often accompanied with a yearning for adult company:

"When you physically ache for Friday to come around, so that you have co-parent company for the oh-so-short weekend." (Blogger 2)

Single parents highlighted this aloneness at night when their children were in bed, and a lack of company was magnified:

"The loneliness often sets in at night when my daughter has gone to bed, I find that there is no one I can share or talk to about my day, the challenges I've faced, the worries I have or even the exciting opportunities I've been offered." (Blogger 10)

Other parents highlighted that their loneliness was exacerbated by migration or relocation:

For me, there is nothing more disorienting or lonely than the first week on your own in a new house, when your other half has gone to work, when parts of the house still need unpacking, you don't know anyone and you need Google Maps to go anywhere. (Blogger 12)

Sharing their experience of being a lonely parent with others was a comfort. Opportunities to meet with other parents in person or by connecting with them online through parenting groups and forums helped to reduce their feelings of isolation and loneliness, and to overcome their sense of disconnection:

"It made a world of difference in my life, just having that tiny bit of communication with grown people throughout my day. ...We are so lucky to have access to friendship in the palm of our hands. Find stay at home mom forums and talk to other women who are going through what you're going through." (Blogger 3)

Need for shared experiences

There was an awareness from some of the bloggers that they were unlikely to be the only parents who felt the way they did; "*all mothers feel isolated at some point (or various points) throughout motherhood*" (Blogger 13), which they found reassuring "*loneliness can happen to anyone*" (Blogger 1).

In some of the blogs, parents highlighted that blogging was an instrument to create a connection to others by acknowledging that they were not alone in this lonely experience of parenthood:

"The reason I've chose to write this post is to try and bring mums together, to share with you all that feeling lonely happens to so many of us once we become parents, to make mums aware that there are so many other lonely mums out there and to say that I too am just another lonely mum as well." (Blogger 11b)

Highlighted across the blog posts was the importance of having "*mummy friends*", rather than those who are not parents to connect with, that could share their experiences of being a parent:

"(talking about non-mum friends) - They can't relate to those late night breakdowns because you've gotten up to feed a baby countless times while the world sleeps and you're at the brink of exhaustion. They can't relate to the confusion of feeling like you're a different person postpartum. They can't relate to the way it changes your relationship with your significant other. They can't relate to any of it and while that doesn't take away from the friendship you have, it certainly creates a void that can't be filled by them." (Blogger 21)

Parents also highlighted the importance of overcoming anxiety of

going to groups and meeting new people in their advice to other parents:

“Ask that mum at the baby group if she fancies meeting up for a brew at some point. That’s what I did in 2015 and I was lucky enough to find one of my best friends.” (Blogger 12)

Feeling different and not fitting in

Some parents felt a sense of disconnection through feeling like they did not fit in with other parents or were different to others in some specific way. For one parent, being a dad who stays at home made him feel different to other parents, and which resulted in a sense of isolation:

Stay at home dads, work from home dads, grandfathers or any man with a significant caring responsibility faces some major social challenges because people don’t expect men to be carers. It’s not just the man that is socially isolated, it affects the entire family unit. (Blogger 7)

Another parent talked about how being younger than other parents made her feel like she did not “click” with other mothers:

“I did try taking [child’s name] to play groups which was a big deal for me as I don’t like taking myself out of my comfort zone but I did it anyway, however I didn’t feel like I really clicked with any of the other mums there. They were all either older than me, had already formed ‘cliques’ or just weren’t interested in speaking to me. Or at least that’s how I felt anyway.” (Blogger 11b)

Other parents commented on how being a single parent made them feel different and isolated from those who were not:

“When you go to other kid’s birthday parties or get together and you’re the only one running around after your toddlers making sure they’re being nice, not getting into trouble, or not eating everything off the floor. It makes you feel alone because you notice all the other parents are a team. They take turns watching their kids while you don’t have that luxury.” (Blogger 13)

Parents with children with special needs also noted this feeling of disconnect centred around having different experiences of parenthood to others – an experience that was magnified when their children were excluded:

“I think we all know how isolating it is to be the parent of a special needs child. We stand apart, on the edge of society, never quite feeling included. ... We made some friends amongst the parents. It wasn’t easy. There was no ‘would your son like to come over after school?’ ‘it’s my turn to have your boy as you had mine last week’.” (Blogger 14a)”

For a few parents there was an awareness that their feelings of loneliness were magnified by their social anxiety and/or feelings of social paranoia or fear of negative evaluation from others. This resulted in them having “*very few close friends*” (Blogger 14a) and they tended to “*shy away from social interaction*” (Blogger 8). Some were aware that these feelings were present long before becoming a parent, although one noted that they were aware of when these feelings of anxiety had started:

“I don’t know when it started happening, at what stage I felt differently, but I now have a sense of people disliking me, even if there isn’t the evidence to back my thoughts up. I’ll become convinced that people are talking about me behind my back, that I’m not really welcome at meet ups, that I’ve been invited out of pity. If I don’t get invited at all, my thoughts go into overdrive.” (Blogger 8)

Several parents highlighted the importance of finding parents with similar experiences through specific parenting groups to help address their feelings of disconnection:

“For me, my saving grace was attending my local multiple birth association playgroup and connecting with other multiple birth parents

online. The families that I met in person and online have become some of my closest friends. As one twin mum said, it’s like co-existing with others but on a parallel universe which you’ll never understand unless you’ve experienced it.” (Blogger 20)

Discussion

This study analysed parents’ online blog posts to further understand the experience of loneliness and social isolation in parenthood in blogging parents. The findings highlight an underlying sense of disconnection realised through parenthood being overwhelming distancing them from others, a change in self-identity, feeling that it was difficult to share feelings of loneliness as a parent and a need for social connection. Those who felt different to other parents in specific ways (e.g., parents with children with specific needs, stay-at-home fathers, single parents) or who had social anxieties or social paranoia also faced specific difficulties which exacerbated their sense of disconnection.

The findings depict parenthood as a rite of passage as individuals transition from being an individual, to being a parent with a baby to care for. Similar to other phases in life, where there are changes in social circumstances, connections and friendships, such as going to university (Diehl et al., 2018) or retirement (Segel-Karpas et al., 2018), parenting can lead to disconnection, isolation and loneliness. Thus, the experiences of blogging parents in this study may not be unique and may be similar to those of others experiencing major life changes. Blogging parents described a culture shock in becoming a parent. They outlined a transitory process of getting used to a new normal – with a different role and responsibilities. This was also magnified for these parents who felt a sense of loss as they had to leave a previous life (i.e., working parents) as they adjusted to the new one. These findings resonate with the concept of liminality, the middle stage in a rite of passage when an individual has had to leave behind their previous status, and they have not fully embraced the new role (Wels et al., 2011). Liminality is when an individual is at the threshold, a betwixt space where their identity is in a state of flux. Our reading of the blogs is that this liminal stage created feelings of loneliness and isolation as the individuals had not fully adapted and adjusted to their new role, routines and purpose as a parent. Furthermore, it may be that those who face more complex issues, such as having children with specific needs, or those who face communication challenges (e.g. due to social anxiety) experience a more prolonged liminal space. This relationship between liminality and loneliness is experienced in the transition to university and retirement (Bordia et al., 2020; Rutherford and Pickup, 2015; Wanka, 2019) so may be a common experience in major life changes were adjustment to new roles and identities occur.

Blogging parents reported that it was difficult to share their experiences with family and friends because of fears of disbelief and guilt. The difficulties in expressing feelings of loneliness were two-fold – first there was a perceived social stigma of loneliness, and second there was a perception that they will be disbelieved and shamed for not coping. In the wider literature there is perceived social stigma around lonely people lacking social skills and ‘loners’ not helping themselves (Kerr and Stanley, 2021). Lau and Gruen (1992) described the lonely target as a person who “*pretty much keeps to himself*.” This is problematic because recent research shows that lonely people do not have deficient social skills (Gardner et al., 2005), and they spend no more time alone than nonlonely people (Hawkey et al., 2003; Queen et al., 2014). These findings also resonate with wider literature that highlights how parents with poor mental health often refrain from making disclosures due to fears of reprisals (Sambrook Smith et al., 2019). Social constructions of being a ‘good parent’, such as one who is happy to have had a healthy baby, can also create blame, guilt and silence, and parents feeling unwilling to express a different narrative. These issues raise important questions about how we prepare and support families for new parenthood and call for raising awareness about the adjustment and change in

the transition to parenthood. The findings emphasise the importance of programmes of support throughout the perinatal period, including antenatal classes and universal home visiting, that can offer a safe space for naming feelings of loneliness. Skills in sensitive communication to name feelings and acknowledge the validity of loneliness as a real parenting challenge are critical for healthcare professionals.

In terms of solutions, several bloggers spoke of the value and need for connections with others. Receiving peer support from those who have had a similar experience can help normalise and validate and provide reassurance from those who understand. Peer support is a well-known intervention in a perinatal context, such as infant feeding (Thomson et al., 2012), neonatal care (Thomson and Balaam, 2019) and for those who had a difficult birth experience (Roberts et al., 2021). Our findings also highlight how peer support is crucial for those who face more difficult and complex experiences, such as having a disabled child.

Strengths and limitations

The blogs provided rich exploratory and self-reflective data that offer new findings related to loneliness during the transition to parenthood. The limitations are that these insights are from a very specific articulate groups of parents, although a number did face additional challenges such as having children with specific needs. Given the sparse literature on parents' experiences of loneliness it will be important for future qualitative work with parents from a wider range of backgrounds (e.g. different cultures, non-blogging parents) to examine whether the findings in this study are generalisable.

The majority also did not agree to their blogs being used, which may be due to out of date contact details, or bloggers not wanting their data to be included. Further research that uses sensitive methods to capture insights from more vulnerable and marginalised groups, such as asylum seekers, those who do not speak the native language, younger parents, etc., is needed.

Appendices

Table A1

Table A1

Citation information for included blogs.

ID	Blog Name	Title of Article	Weblink
1	Ashley Henderson Gaskin	The fight against Motherhood loneliness	http://ashhendersongaskin.com/2019/06/02/the-fight-against-motherhood-loneliness/
2	Office Mum	On loneliness in Motherhood	http://officemum.ie/on-loneliness-in-motherhood/
3	Kaleigh Merrill	Stay at home mom loneliness	http://www.kaleighmerrill.com/2016/03/14/stay-at-home-mom-loneliness/
4	Victoria Anwen	Motherhood and loneliness at any stage	http://victoriaanwen.blogspot.com/2019/02/motherhood-and-loneliness-at-any-stage.html
5	Kizzy and Dizzy	Loneliness, motherhood and making new friends	http://www.kizzyandizzy.com/2017/02/13/loneliness-motherhood-and-making-mum-friends/
6	Nothing good Rhymes with Charlotte	loneliness and time alone and how becoming a mum changed my relationship with both	http://www.nothinggoodrhymeswithcharlotte.com/loneliness-and-time-alone-and-how-becoming-a-mum-changed-my-relationship-with-both/
7	Dad Blog Uk	social connections: the lonely business of fatherhood	https://dadbloguk.com/social-connections-the-lonely-business-of-fatherhood/
8	Even Angels Fall	I'm a stay at home mum and my loneliness is suffocating me	https://evenangelsfall.com/2017/10/11/im-a-stay-at-home-mum-im-my-loneliness-is-suffocating-me/
9	From Bump to Baba	Lonely mothers R Us	https://frombumpetobubba.wordpress.com/2019/08/29/lonely-mothers-r-us/
10	Glitzee Glam	Realities of a single parent loneliness	https://glitzeeglam.com/mummy-baby/realities-of-a-single-parent-loneliness/
11a	Life as the Lonsdales	Another lonely mum	https://lifeasthelonsdales.com/2018/05/12/another-lonely-mum/
11b	Life as the Lonsdales	Loneliness in motherhood	https://lifeasthelonsdales.com/2019/12/07/loneliness-in-motherhood/
12	Military Mummy	Loneliness	https://militarymummy.home.blog/2019/02/06/loneliness/
13	Raising Biracial Babies	Isolation as a single mum	https://raisingbiracialbabies.com/isolation-as-a-single-mom/
14a	Sarah J Ziegel	The isolation of a special needs mum	https://sarahjziegel.wordpress.com/2019/02/15/the-isolation-of-a-special-needs-mum/
14b	Sarah J Ziegel	The isolation of a special needs mum 2	https://sarahjziegel.wordpress.com/2019/11/01/the-isolation-of-a-special-needs-mum-2/
15	The Stork and I	How I've decided to tackle my loneliness in 2019	https://thestorkandi.com/2019/01/01/how-ive-decided-to-tackle-my-loneliness-in-2019/
16	Caitylis	Battling loneliness as a mum and how to make friends	https://www.caitylis.co.uk/2019/09/battling-loneliness-as-a-mum-and-how-to-make-friends.html

(continued on next page)

Conclusion

There is previous evidence to support that some parents experience chronic or persistent loneliness; however, the details of these experiences are limited. Using blog posts as a data source which can provide a rich narrative of these experiences. The findings highlight an underlying sense of disconnection realised through parenthood being overwhelming distancing them from others, a change in self-identity, feeling that it was difficult to share feelings of loneliness as a parent and a need for social connection. All of which contributed to feelings of loneliness and a sense of social isolation. Parenthood is depicted as a rite of passage requiring a transition from being an individual, to being a parent with a baby to care for. These findings have implications for the resourcing and focus of antenatal education and post-natal support services. This work needs to be underpinned by co-production and realist methodology to help understand what helps for whom in what context.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

All data used for the research project is available in the public domain. Web addresses for included blogs are provided.

Table A1 (continued)

ID	Blog Name	Title of Article	Weblink
17	CF Community Blog	It's possible to find hope amidst the loneliness	https://www.cff.org/CF-Community-Blog/Posts/2016/Its-Possible-to-Find-Hope-Amidst-the-Loneliness-and-Isolation-of-CF/
18	Itzy Bella Babby	Isolation as a new mom	https://www.itzybellababy.com/isolation-new-mom/
19	Katie Louise	Lonely mummy moments as a working mum	https://www.katie-louise.com/2018/02/12/lonely-mummy-moments-working-mum/#.XdUUNNXgqUk
20	Mamamia	Having twins	https://www.mamamia.com.au/having-twins/
21	The Uncharted Motherhood	Isolation	https://www.theunchartedmotherhood.com/the-uncharted-blog/isolation
22	Whinge Wine	Stay at home parent just really lonely	https://www.whingewhingewine.co.uk/stay-home-parent-just-really-lonely.html

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