Experiences of Loneliness Among Adults Who Attended Boarding School

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Abstract

Background: Loneliness is linked to multiple mental and physical health conditions. It can be chronic and recurrent; those who experience loneliness in childhood may be more prone to experiencing it in adulthood. The school environment could be a setting where loneliness is first experienced. Boarding school students may be particularly vulnerable due to separation from parents and increased exposure to bullying. Currently, few studies explore boarding school and loneliness.

Aims: To explore experiences of loneliness for adult ex-boarders.

Method: A qualitative technique was used. In total, 18 adult ex-boarders were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. Individual semi-structured interviews were held via video-call. Data were transcribed and analysed in line with thematic analysis, using NVivo 12 software.

Findings: Five main themes were found including, Perspectives on Loneliness, How We Learned to Hide Our Vulnerability, Navigating Loneliness as Ex-Boarders, Avoidance and Resilience; Two Sides of the Same Coin and Bonds Both Protect and Predispose Loneliness. In addition, 13 subthemes were discussed. Adult ex-boarders gave varied definitions and descriptions of loneliness. Barriers to addressing loneliness at boarding school and in adulthood were discussed, including a sense of stigma and shame to admitting loneliness. Coping mechanisms used to combat loneliness were both avoidant and adaptive; for some, strategies to cope with loneliness at boarding school are still used today.

Conclusions: Boarding schools should be encouraged to normalise loneliness for students. Findings suggest a need for increased support to address loneliness at boarding school. This

may alleviate experiences of loneliness that persist into adulthood. Ex-boarders may be poorly equipped to recognise when they are experiencing loneliness, or cope when it occurs. There is a still a strong stigma surrounding admitting loneliness that needs to be addressed within the boarding school system and more widely.

Introduction

1.1.1 Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an introduction to the current study. Firstly, loneliness and its various definitions will be discussed. Theories of loneliness will be explored and critiqued. The determinants and impact of loneliness across the lifespan will also be detailed, as well as current government policies and campaigns to address loneliness.

Evidence indicates that early life experiences can result in loneliness during adulthood. Therefore, the introduction will consider how loneliness in adulthood might be influenced by childhood experiences. The impact of both the home and school environment on loneliness in both childhood and adulthood will be explored. The chapter will then consider how the boarding school environment may impact experiences of loneliness. The British Council estimates that there are 500 boarding schools across the UK (British Council, 2019). Despite their prevalence, little is known about the psychological impact of attending boarding school. The school environment may be a setting where loneliness is first experienced. Boarding school students may be particularly vulnerable due to separation from parents and increased exposure to bullying (Lester et al., 2015). As loneliness can be recurrent and chronic (Junttila et al., 2016) boarding school students may be pre-disposed to

experiencing loneliness in adulthood. Existing literature exploring the boarding school environment and loneliness will therefore be reviewed and critiqued. A systematic review of current literature exploring young adult experiences of loneliness in the general population will be then conducted, to see if common themes emerge.

Finally, the aims of the current study will be outlined and the research question will be defined. Erikson's (1993) fourth stage of psychosocial development – "Intimacy vs Isolation" – is discussed to emphasise the need for greater research investigating experiences of loneliness in young adults, as is explored in the current study.

1.1.2 Loneliness

1.1.1. Loneliness Defined

Experiences of loneliness are unique and subjective. There are a number of different definitions of loneliness. The Oxford Learners Dictionary (2021) defines loneliness as "a feeling of being unhappy because you have no friends or people to talk to" and "the fact of a period of time being sad and spent alone". These definitions emphasise that the physical act of being alone can cause loneliness. However, other definitions suggest that loneliness is a multidimensional experience.

Weiss (1973) categorised loneliness into two distinct types. Social loneliness is defined as the desire for a social network. Emotional loneliness is defined as the desire for close emotional bonds. Support for these categories has been found in literature investigating loneliness (e.g. Junttila & Vauras, 2009; Qualter & Munn, 2002). This indicates that both the quality and the quantity of relationships experienced by individuals can be of importance (De Jong Gierveld, 1998).

Cacioppo & Cacioppo (2018) define loneliness as “distress resulting from a discrepancy between desired and perceived social relationships”. This is in line with the view of Peplau & Perlman (1982) who state that loneliness occurs when an individual’s social interactions do not meet their needs. There is a human need for intimate relationships and the sense of belonging with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Satisfying these needs contributes to our psychological wellbeing and can increase our chance of survival (Peplau and Perlman, 1982). A sense of belonging is a fundamental motivational concept that is essential for developing and keeping positive relationships (Baumeister, 2012, Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Alternative views state that it is possible to feel lonely when you are around other people and be totally alone but not experience loneliness (Townsend & Tunstall, 1973; Wenger, Davies, Shatahmasebi, & Scott, 1996). It may be that it is the quality of relationships that determines if they are sufficient to meet an individual’s needs (De Jong Gierveld, 1988). De Jong states that it is people’s perceptions of their interactions with others that determines loneliness. As the need for interaction varies, this could explain the variation in people’s accounts of loneliness. Killeen (1988) distinguishes between loneliness and social isolation. ‘Loneliness’ has negative connotations, whereas ‘social isolation’ can be interpreted as either positive or negative, depending on whether the individual has chosen to be in that state or not. This is in line with De Jong’s view that a person’s perception of their state is crucial in determining the feeling of loneliness.

1.1.2. Determinants of Loneliness

The Campaign to End Loneliness (2019) approximates that in excess of 9 million UK based adults feel lonely either always or often. It can be experienced at any age, but research

shows that loneliness is most prevalent in those aged below 25 and above 65 (Victor and Yang, 2012). Recent government data showed that 7% of adults aged 25 to 34 said that they are lonely often/always, compared to 6% of adults aged and 35 to 49 and 6% aged 50 to 64 (Community Life Survey 2020/21). Research exploring the intensity of loneliness across the lifespan found that loneliness peaks for individuals at age 19 (Shovestul, Han, Germine, & Dodell-Feder, 2020), which is in line with other data showing elevated levels of loneliness for individuals in late adolescence (Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016) and early adulthood (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2003). In 2019 nearly 25% of all millennials could not name a single friend (YouGov Poll, 2019). Loneliness is not always a stable construct and can be experienced intermittently or chronically for an extended period of time. Children have reported feeling more lonely over time (Jobe-Shields, Cohen & Parra, 2011; Qualter & Mun, 2013; Vanhalst, Goossens, Luyckx & Scholte, 2013). Many individuals aged 30 to 60 who describe feeling lonely state they have felt lonely before; around 30% state they experienced childhood loneliness, 50% state they experienced adolescent loneliness and 80% state they experienced loneliness as an early adult (Junttila, Topalli & Kainulainen, 2016).

Social and cultural factors may contribute to loneliness. Society may suggest that having a particular number of relationships is prime, causing individuals who have fewer relationships to be more at risk of feeling lonely compared to other people (Jylha & Jokela, 1990). Geography may determine loneliness; individuals living in rural areas may find it more difficult to have their social needs met (Fischer, 1973; Scott, 1979).

Increasing in age may increase an individual's chance of experiencing loneliness. It can be harder to form new relationships as age increases and social networks tend to reduce (Morgan, 1988; Holme, Ericsson, & Winblad, 1994). Declining health may be a further factor; individuals with chronic conditions may be unable to interact socially as much as they

desire (De Jong Gierveld & van Tilburg, 1995). Social skills and personality characteristics may also determine someone's propensity to feel lonely. It is important to consider that some of the factors noted above may increase an individual's likelihood to feel socially isolated as opposed to lonely. It could be the case that for some, social isolation prompts the onset of loneliness.

1.1.3. The Impact of Loneliness

The impact of loneliness can have transdiagnostic effects on mental wellbeing (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). It has been related to increased suicide in later life (O'Connell, Chin, Cunningham, & Lawlor, 2004) and can be reciprocally linked to symptoms of depression (Cacioppo, Hawkley & Thisted, 2010) and social anxiety (Lim, Rodebaugh, Zyphur & Gleeson, 2016), indicating that targeting loneliness may help improve mental health. A systematic review of the literature exploring the impact of loneliness on mental health suggested that greater loneliness is linked to more severe anxiety and depression and worse depression remission (Wang, Mann, Lloyd-Evans, Ma & Johnson, 2018). People facing mental health crises often experience relatively severe loneliness which can become more severe during ill health (Wang, Lloyd-Evans, Marston, Ma, Mann, Solmi & Johnson, 2020). Increased awareness of loneliness within mental health support settings may be needed. Loneliness could be a focus for interventions aiming to increase wellbeing for individuals experiencing poor mental health (Wang, Lloyd-Evans, Marston, Ma, Mann, Solmi & Johnson, 2020).

Loneliness can also impact physical health. One recent study of adults aged 50 years or over found that social isolation or loneliness was linked to heightened risk of heart disease and stroke. Loneliness among heart failure patients was linked to almost four times increased

risk of death, 68% increased risk of hospital admission and 57% increased risk of A & E attendance. Social isolation significantly boosted risk of early death from all causes, rivalling risks caused by smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity. Social isolation was linked with roughly 50% increased risk of dementia (National Academies of Sciences, 2020).

It should be noted that studies exploring loneliness vary in the ways that they measure and report on loneliness. Some use measurement scales that ask questions purely on loneliness, others combine social isolation and loneliness and some address just social isolation. Scales also differ in the extent to which they measure social and emotional loneliness. For example, the UCLA Loneliness Scale focuses on social, rather than emotional loneliness so fails to capture emotional loneliness (Sønderby & Wagoner, 2013). High levels of emotional loneliness have been found in studies exploring loneliness (e.g. see Junttila & Vauras, 2009). As there is no universally agreed definition of loneliness, it can be hard to measure (Hayes, 2019). Measures of loneliness overlap with measures of wellbeing and mental health. This can make it challenging to differentiate between cause and effect given the impact of overlapping constructs. This means that there are limits to what it is possible to conclude from quantitative loneliness research.

1.1.4. COVID-19 and Loneliness

There has been a recent resurgence of research into loneliness as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdown restrictions resulted in abrupt social isolation within the UK and internationally. A recent review of loneliness and social isolation during COVID-19 found that an increase in loneliness occurred, particularly when pre-pandemic measurements were taken at months or years before the pandemic started. Reports with pre COVID-19 measurements weeks or days before the pandemic showed stable or decreasing loneliness trends. On average, the quality of relationships was viewed as worse during COVID-19 than

previously. This view was found to get stronger during the first two weeks of the pandemic and then levelled off after that point. Subjects reported that they had, on average, fewer social interactions than before the pandemic (Buecker & Horstmann, 2021). The authors comment that there are very few longitudinal studies exploring loneliness during COVID-19, the majority are cross sectional. The review included 36 cross sectional, 13 longitudinal and 4 qualitative and 49 quantitative studies. It included participants of a variety of ages from children to older adults, from a variety of countries, with studies differing in sample sizes. It highlights the need for high quality longitudinal research into the impact of COVID-19 on loneliness.

Other research has shown that some risk factors for loneliness remain identical to non-pandemic times (e.g., women and also people living alone). Some individuals were at risk of loneliness who normally are not (e.g., students). Others were at a more heightened risk than usual (e.g., younger people and people on lower incomes). This may suggest that interventions to reduce loneliness during COVID-19, which is still ongoing, need to be targeted towards sociodemographic groups already known to be higher risk in existing research (Bu et al., 2020).

1.1.3 Models of Loneliness

The causes of loneliness during different life stages have been considered and different theoretical perspectives have been applied. Cognitive, psychodynamic, attachment and social theories will be considered in relation to loneliness.

1.1.5. Cognitive Theories

Cognitive theories suggest that cognitive processes are the cause of loneliness. The Cognitive discrepancy theory of loneliness proposes that loneliness is the result of a discrepancy between the interpersonal relationships a person wishes to have and those that

they perceive they have (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Drawing on attribution theory, the cognitive discrepancy theory proposes that lonely individuals attribute the causes of loneliness to be due to the actions of themselves or others. How they attribute causality can affect their psychological state (Murphy & Kupshik, 1992). In line with this, it has been found that chronically lonely people have very high expectations for interpersonal relationships (Shaver et al.,1985). Changes in either an actual or desired social relationship can result in loneliness with attitudes and attributions mediating the relationship. Cognitive discrepancy therefore requires the lonely individual to perceive their social interactions as unfulfilling (Motta, 2021). However, one criticism of this theory is that it needs people to have a level of awareness of a discrepancy, and "many individuals show distress due to unsatisfactory social relationships when they are unaware of a discrepancy between their desired and actual relationships" (Marangoni & Ickes, 1989, p. 104). As many people are lonely without being aware of these kinds of cognitive processes, this demonstrates that this theory cannot hold true for all cases of loneliness.

1.1.6. Psychodynamic and Attachment Theories

A psychodynamic theory of loneliness posits that loneliness may be rooted in experiences during infancy, when early needs for contact are un-met. It suggests that loneliness is underpinned by the infant's attachment to its mother or primary care giver. Early attachment to the care giver enables the child to experience emotional connections with others. Loneliness may arise when significant individuals, such as parents, are consistently out of sight. It also may result from a lack of loving intimacy and physical contact during childhood (Sønderby & Wagoner, 2013). When the infants' needs are consistently unmet, they may fail to form a secure attachment to their primary caregiver. They may struggle to learn that when the caregiver goes away, they do not cease to exist, and will come back. This can result in a feeling of isolation for the child, which can persist into adulthood and

throughout life. It may result in attachment difficulties with other individuals and cause a fear of love and intimacy, resulting in loneliness (Reichmann, 1959). Sullivan further emphasized the need for parental tenderness in infancy and childhood (Sullivan, 1955). Psychodynamic theory underpins the Social Needs Approach to loneliness, which states that loneliness is the consequence of a breakdown of social needs in childhood (Marangoni & Ickes, 1989). The Social Needs Approach emphasises the young child's need for contact and how this need persists across the lifespan. However, a criticism of this approach is that it reduces loneliness to a specific domain – i.e., a social construct only – and fails to consider cognitive processes at play, which may also be contributing to a felt sense of loneliness.

More exploration of early attachment and loneliness can be found in the work of John Bowlby (1969). His attachment theory emphasised the need that infants have to be drawn into relationships with people and is used to understand how individuals relate to others. This theory came from his observations of behaviours used by babies to prevent separation from caregivers, for example crying and clutching on. Attachment theory originally focused on relationships developed in infancy, but was later extended to consider how infant experiences can influence adult attachment styles (Hazan & Shaver, 1990).

Four adult attachment styles have been identified (Bartholomew & Horowitz 1991). Anxious-avoidant adults find it hard to trust others so avoid emotionally intimate relationships. Childhood trauma often underpins this attachment relationship. An avoidant attachment relationship is characterised by a need to be independent and a lack of reliance on close emotional connections to other people. An anxious attachment relationship is characterised by a dependence on other people; individuals seek close emotional bonds to others and depend on others for constant reassurance. A securely attached adult will have had their needs met constantly in early infancy. It is possible for them to create close emotional

bonds to others with relative ease. They are independent yet able to reach out to others to get their needs met.

Personality characteristics and relationships with others may be predisposed by attachment history (Bowlby; 1973, 1979). The mother-infant bond is a "deep-seated biological inheritance" so if this bond breaks, loneliness may be the outcome (Bowlby, 1973). An individual with a history of secure attachment may believe relationships with trustworthy individuals are possible and subsequently consider themselves as capable of being loved. Furthermore, they may be better able to assess the quality of their relationships with others and consider if their needs are being met (Salo, Junttila, & Vauras, 2020). Children with secure maternal attachment describe lower levels of loneliness compared to children with insecure maternal attachment during middle childhood (Kerns & Stevens, 1996). Studies with students by Hojat found an association between deficient child-parent attachment and increased anxiety, loneliness, depression, low self-esteem and low sociability compared to students with healthy child-parent attachment (Hojat, 1998; Hojat et al., 1990). This association has been supported by other studies, which found a link between poor parent attachment and high loneliness and low mood (Besser & Priel, 2005; Wiseman et al., 2006). The family environment therefore plays a crucial role in shaping social and emotional skills for children and loneliness may be more likely in children raised in a socially isolated family (Solomon, 2000).

Early experiences of loneliness within the family fold may lead to internalization of the causes of poor social experiences which can result in further isolation and increased loneliness (Vanhalst et al., 2015). Research shows that intergenerational transmission of loneliness can occur; long term social loneliness of sons can be predicted by their father's loneliness and that of daughters can be predicted by their mother's loneliness (Salo et al.,

2020). Parental loneliness has been found to significantly predict young adult loneliness (Segrin et al., 2012). Sharabi et al. (2012) found that a lack of family unity was a determinant that predicts child loneliness. This further emphasises the value of the parent-child relationship in determining experiences of loneliness.

A connection between childhood attachment and loneliness experienced later in life seems to exist (Sønderby & Wagoner, 2013). However, it is likely that other factors - aside from attachment - contribute to adult loneliness. Critics argue that the caregiver is not the only influence on the infant; the environment and peers should be considered too. Infants also attach to a multiplicity of people in their lives, for example school teachers. This creates opportunities for several different attachments styles to be formed (Field, 1996). Attachment style is therefore unlikely to be the sole determinant of loneliness in adulthood.

1.1.7. Social Theories

Societal changes may be impacting experiences of loneliness. The move from a collectivist to a more individualist society in the UK post-industrialisation, may have impacted upon how we interact with one another. Changes in attitudes, increased women's rights and a capitalist framework have resulted in an increase in divorce, childlessness, and people living on their own (Gillies, 2003; Snell, 2016). People no longer rely on their community for support, which may result in loneliness. It could be argued that as individualistic societies value their independence and make individual decisions about how much social interaction to have, loneliness may result when this autonomy is taken away, for example, through the death of a loved one. Conversely, a person in a collectivist society may feel lonely when the social interaction that they value is lacking (Lykes and Kemmelmeier, 2013).

Peplau & Perlman (1982) postulate that social reinforcement may underpin loneliness. A lack of social interaction may prevent positive experiences of socialising to occur, thus the individual does not experience any sense of positive reinforcement. They are therefore less likely to participate in further social interaction, which in the long-term may result in loneliness. Conversely, someone who talks frequently with friends and loved ones and finds this rewarding is more likely to seek out this interaction in future. They may therefore experience less loneliness. Social reinforcement may also impact upon individuals talking about feeling lonely, due to the stigma associated with loneliness. This may make it feel like a shameful issue to be experiencing and consequently keep lonely people trapped in a vicious cycle of loneliness.

Recent literature on social media use draws on social reinforcement theory, where individuals may be inclined to post more online content as they receive more 'likes' and positive reactions to their content. Social media use has been associated with both positive and negative psychosocial outcomes, including loneliness. Active social media use, where individuals chat with others online, has been found to reinforce social ties and foster new contacts and relationships, which can increase psychosocial wellbeing (e.g., Bano et al., 2019, Chen and Li, 2017, Pang, 2018a). Passive use, where individuals just browse and do not communicate, can result in social comparison and envy, (Appel et al., 2015, Wang et al., 2018) which reduces wellbeing (Marttila et al., 2021) and in turn may result in loneliness. One study found that lonely individuals are more likely to experience the adverse consequences of excessive social media use (Arampatzi et al., 2018).

1.1.4 The Government's Loneliness Agenda

In 2018 the UK Government appointed a Minister for loneliness and launched a £11.5 million Building Connections Fund (Government Press Release, 2018). It introduced the

world's first government loneliness strategy which outlined a number of commitments to tackle the problem of loneliness in the UK and the impact it has on public health and the economy. This is unsurprising given loneliness has been predicted to cost employers £2.5 billion yearly (New Economics Foundation, 2017). The strategy included creating measures to support key workers to recognise and act upon loneliness. It also aimed to improve social prescribing, which is the process of health professionals referring patients for support offered in the community to improve their wellbeing (Bickerdike et al., 2017). This can enable people to be better connected to care when feeling lonely. The government started a 'Let's Talk Loneliness' campaign to normalise talking about loneliness as a common human emotion. The government has also commissioned significant projects to help improve the evidence base for loneliness, such as trialling loneliness measures introduced by the Office for National Statistics and collecting case studies of experiences of loneliness from within different communities. Progress has been made in delivering on these commitments. However, an annual report in January 2020 highlighted how work has only just begun. The report recognised that there is still a requirement for increased information and communication about loneliness and potential strategies to reduce it. It also highlighted the requirement for more policies to target loneliness for young people as young people currently report one of the highest levels of loneliness, yet interventions to target this are sparse (Loneliness Annual Report Policy Paper, 2020).

1.1.5 The Medicalisation of Loneliness

A "prevention rather than cure" approach to loneliness has been adopted by the government, where the ambition is that people have access to support before loneliness becomes a crisis (Department of Health, 2007). The government proposed that frontline primary care staff, including GPs, are involved with early recognition and prevention of loneliness. However, it could be argued that describing loneliness as if it is a medical

condition may be medicalising what is a social problem. Despite the medical model being central in underpinning Western healthcare, critics stress that medicalisation can adversely impact people's welfare by eliminating a feeling of autonomy over people's health (Illich, 1975). Indeed, much of the current literature on loneliness medicalises the experience by describing its 'prevalence'. Some argue that it should be considered a public health problem (Pies, 2010). Situating loneliness within the NHS remit, may mean the social causes of loneliness, as mentioned previously, fail to be addressed. Furthermore, GPs may need more training on social issues such as loneliness, more practical and emotional help for managing loneliness and a more efficient approach to addressing loneliness in primary care (Jovicic & McPherson, 2019). Loneliness remains outside of the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition, American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It is not currently screened as routine within primary care settings but recent research has indicated that integrating loneliness measures into healthcare intake forms may help healthcare providers better assess mental health and provide appropriate support (Godfrey et al., 2021).

1.1.6 Early Life Experiences and Loneliness in Adulthood

Theories of loneliness suggest that early life experiences can lead to loneliness in both childhood and adulthood that may be chronic or recurrent. Attachment difficulties, including broken attachments to the primary care giver, may result in feelings of distrust and difficulties forming secure attachments to others. This may hinder relationship formation in later life, leading to loneliness in adulthood (Sønderby & Wagoner, 2013). Intergenerational transmission of loneliness from parents to children may make children vulnerable to experiencing loneliness in childhood that continues into adulthood. A lack of family cohesion may mean that positive social interactions are not reinforced for the child, making them harder to learn and emulate as adults (Solomon, 2000). Unhealthy social media use may start in childhood and continue into adulthood, perpetuating feelings of loneliness further.

It is therefore clear that early life experiences within the family environment may influence experiences of loneliness in adulthood. The school environment is a further possible aspect of early life experience that impacts loneliness, both at the time of attendance and in adulthood. Literature that addresses the school environment and its impact on children at the time of attendance, will now be reviewed. This will be followed by a systematic review of literature on adult experiences of loneliness. This may help shed light on the impact of the school environment on experiences of loneliness in adulthood.

1.1.7 The School Environment and Loneliness

Interpersonal skills and perceived self-worth, influenced by the early childhood setting, may be reinforced by interactions with peers (Segrin et al., 2012). The school environment may therefore act as a key place where early experiences of loneliness can be first felt. A sense of belongingness within the school environment is a key psychological concept linked with wellbeing outcomes (Arslan, 2018a; Arslan & Tanhan, 2019; Oysterman, 2000). School belongingness has been defined as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 61). An unsatisfied sense of belonging can result in a range of psycho-social issues such as loneliness (Arslan, 2021). Belongingness is strongly linked with loneliness (Arslan & Duru, 2017; Malone et al., 2012; Satici & Tekin, 2016; Yildiz & Duy, 2014) so adolescents feeling loneliness may experience less school belongingness. Loneliness has detrimental effects on adolescents' well-being and is a risk factor for emotional and behavioural issues (Cacioppo et al., 2006) so understanding loneliness amongst school children may be a public health priority.

Both quantitative and qualitative research has explored loneliness in school children. Recent quantitative research has found that social inclusion has a significant predictive effect

on adolescent feelings of loneliness; adolescents reporting a low degree of inclusion at school report more feelings of loneliness (Arslan, 2021). These results agree with another study that found social acceptance could longitudinally predict loneliness and mediate the link between self-esteem and loneliness in adolescents (Vanhalst et al., 2013). Other research has found that teenagers with high levels of social inclusion described high wellbeing and fewer psychological difficulties (Arslan, 2018a; Malone et al., 2012). Not being accepted by peers can significantly predict adolescents' symptoms of depression, even after controlling for prior symptoms (Kistner et al., 1999; Shochet et al., 2011). Friendship can be a protective factor for low-accepted children and reduce experiences of loneliness (Parker & Asher, 1993; Renshaw & Brown, 1993; Saxon, 1996). Socially excluded adolescents are likely to be disadvantaged psychologically as well as socially (Ladd and Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2016) and report lower well-being (Arslan, 2018d; Aydın et al., 2013; Gilman et al., 2013; Malone et al., 2012). Quantitative research therefore sheds light on the links between friendship, social inclusion, loneliness and mental health in children and young people.

As childhood experiences of loneliness can have pervasive effects into adulthood, there is a clear need to address factors that impact experiences of loneliness in the school setting. Quantitative studies are limited in that they sometimes use small sample sizes, which reduces analytical power and makes results less reliable (Barreto et al., 2021). Samples often lack diversity, which prevents investigation of issues, including cultural factors (e.g. collectivist cultures vs non-collectivist cultures), that may impact loneliness (Sønderby & Wagoner, 2013). Many studies are cross sectional, so only capture experiences of loneliness at one time point. There are few longitudinal studies that monitor childhood experiences of loneliness over time, which would shed light on developmental trends. Attrition rates are high in existing longitudinal research. Furthermore, loneliness scales offer limited response options which can introduce bias and miss crucial information about experiences of

loneliness. Sønderby & Wagoner (2013) state that “this has created a singular, unidimensional research area, which has forgotten the phenomenological experience of loneliness (De Jong Gierveld, 1998; Jones & Carver, 1991; Rokach, 2004)”. Quantitative scales fail to explore lived experiences of loneliness in a way that qualitative studies do.

However, there is a lack of qualitative evidence exploring the lived experiences of loneliness for school children. One qualitative study found that children who invested in very few friendships were more likely to feel socially isolated. In addition, lonely children were more likely to be victimised by peers (Berguno et al., 2004) and victimisation experiences can lead children to withdraw from interpersonal contact (Lad & Trop Gordon, 2003). Another qualitative study of UK based school children aged six to ten years old, showed that children gave evidence of awareness of loneliness related to physical separation or rejection and also loneliness linked to psychological factors. There were developmental trends in the consistency with which respondents distinguished between feeling lonely and being alone. Younger participants were less likely to attribute a feeling of loneliness at school to being separated or excluded from friendship groups. Evidence was found of children’s ability to describe psychological loneliness, attributing this to feelings of rejection, difference, lack of familiarity, or personal loss (Liepins & Cline, 2011). However, the authors note that the sample was restricted to three schools from a rural area in England. Future studies should aim to use a more ethnic, cultural, and linguistically diverse sample. They also acknowledge the need for studies to systematically explore how certain environments are viewed by children as more likely to cause feelings of loneliness. This data might help teachers and parents work to reduce the impact of these occurrences (Liepins & Cline, 2011).

Research therefore indicates that difficulties with social relationships can contribute to youth experiences of loneliness (Peplau & Perlman, 1982); these experiences can co-occur

with developmental changes such as the transition into adolescence and adulthood, where different social and emotional needs arise.

1.1.8 Boarding School and Loneliness

Boarding school students may be particularly vulnerable to experiencing loneliness. The boarding environment requires adapting from a living situation where daily contact with family changes to one where communication with family is intermittent and limited. This is despite the increased use of social media. This can introduce a range of new psychosocial and emotional factors that may cause loneliness. It is a unique socialisation environment where children and adolescents live during key developmental years. A recent study found that starting boarding school can increase the tendency to experience loneliness (Tang et al., 2020). A number of key factors might contribute towards feelings of loneliness at boarding school, which are discussed below.

1.1.8. Boarding School, Bullying and Loneliness

Considering that boarding school students spend significantly more time in the school environment than non-boarders, the perception of a safe school environment is particularly important (Martin et al., 2014). Despite this, boarding school students report being significantly more likely to be both the perpetrators and victims of bullying, compared to day school students after they transition to secondary school (Lester et al., 2015). Teachers are less likely to provide a child with emotional support compared to parents (Schoggen, 1975). Furthermore, it is not possible to escape bullies and retreat back to the family environment where reassurance and support may be offered. Research has found that loneliness occurs more frequently in adults involved in childhood bullying (Tritt & Duncan, 1997; Segrin et al., 2012) so boarders involved in bullying may be vulnerable to later life loneliness.

A recent study found that boarding students who experienced high levels of bullying at school felt less emotionally and physically safe. Students who acknowledged that bullying takes place at school reported feeling more emotionally safe when they recognised there to be greater levels of mental health support provided by school. However, this support did not buffer the association between school bullying and physical safety (Fredrick et al., 2021). Previous research investigated bullying prevalence in nine boarding schools (N = 300) and six non-boarding schools (N = 406) in Germany. Students who boarded reported greater levels of victimisation and bullying versus those in non-boarding schools. Effect sizes were small to moderate. Negative life satisfaction was associated with victimisation for both boarders and non-boarders, but the association was stronger for boarders. The authors (Pfeiffer & Pinquart, 2014) propose that the residential nature of boarding school means that students find it hard to get away from bullying and victimisation. Therefore, the unique environment of boarding school could impact students' happiness (Martin et al., 2014).

1.1.9. Boarding School, Homesickness and Loneliness

Experiences of loneliness may also be compounded by homesickness. Homesickness can be defined as a "feeling of longing for one's home during a period of absence" (Stroebe et al., 2002). Seventy-one percent of students attending a new boarding school reported experiencing homesickness in their first year, also describing feelings of loneliness (Fisher et al., 1986). Social support can lessen homesickness and increase well-being for boarders. Social support from friends in the boarding school can make homesickness feel more manageable (Zulkarnain et al., 2019). Homesickness has been linked with anxiety, loneliness, social isolation and depression (Strobe et al., 2015). It can cause mood and anxiety disorders to worsen or trigger different conditions such as insomnia, memory problems, digestive issues, immune deficiency and diabetes (Sulastri et al., 2020). Interventions in the form of

psychology and psychoeducation have been found to reduce homesickness in boarding school students through developing the students' skills in facing challenges (Sulastri et al., 2020).

However, it should be noted that not all boarding school students experience homesickness. For some, boarding school removes them from unhappy home environments and places them in a setting where they can form healthier connections compared to the ones that they have left behind. One study (Thurber et al, 2007) found that boarding students living in dormitories experience more homesickness (91%) compared to boarding students sleeping in other settings (16%). Experiences of homesickness at boarding school are therefore variable and subjective.

1.1.10. Boarding School, Attachment and Loneliness

As previously discussed, attachment theory suggests that the development of healthy attachment styles is impacted by parental bonds (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Boarding students, removed from parental guidance, may be deprived compared to day students, regularly exposed to the dependable caregiver (Martin et al., 2014). They may lack a sense of 'internal parent' as a result. The severing of secure early attachments may occur at the point of starting boarding school (Schaverien, 2011), resulting in the formation of new, less dependable relationships, for example, with House Masters, Mistresses, Senior Students or Mentors. This separation from parents may be experienced as a rejection and a trauma (Schaverien, 2011). Children who started boarding school at a younger age may be more traumatised.

The quality of parent-child attachment is crucial to socio-emotional wellbeing in adolescents (Mónaco et al., 2019) including experiences of loneliness. Recent research found a linea causal link between parent attachment and loneliness (Bogaerts et al., 2006). Poor parent attachment was found to contribute to loneliness and also triggered other factors that

can cause loneliness. Young people with poor parent attachment are at increased risk of low self-esteem which can cause loneliness (Karababa, 2021). This supports research suggesting negative personal and interpersonal impacts from the boarding school setting (Fisher et al., 1990).

However, in some cases, the boarding environment provides a space where safe attachments develop, distancing pupils from complicated home environments (Martin et al., 2014). Healthier attachment relationships may therefore form and experiences of loneliness be reduced. One recent study compared adolescent female boarders in boarding and non-boarding school and found no differences in loneliness (Rudrum, 2020). Another study found that boarding has no significant impact on student mental health but loneliness tendency was increased among boarding school students compared to non-boarders (Tang et al., 2020)

Other positive accounts of boarding school describe how it had enabled a young person to 'get ahead'. It had increased a sense of independence from the home environment and it had engendered a tolerance of others as well as a sense of individuality and empowerment (Bramston & Patrick, 2007; Hawkes 2001, Holgate 2007, White, 2004). It should be kept in mind that there is also research suggesting that boarding school students develop "an outward confidence in order to survive". This may be to cover up an inward insecurity and poor self-esteem (Duffell, 2000, Schaverien, 2011).

One study, exploring whether or not 33 former boarding school students viewed their teachers as attachment figures, found a number of results suggesting that students felt more attached to their teachers than their parents (Spina et al., 2019). Students said that they were able to entrust in their teachers or dormitory parents with more ease compared to their own parents, about some issues. They said that there is "a level of comfort and trust" with their boarding school staff which was not present with their own parents, suggesting that they felt

secure in the bonds they have with school staff. However, the authors note that many boarders felt more at ease communicating with school staff because they viewed these relationships as temporary. Their parents were viewed as permanent figures. Additionally, students may have been guarded when communicating with their parents. They may have been afraid of parental disapproval and disappointment. School staff may have seemed like less of a threat in this way.

Research has indicated that the duration of time spent at boarding school can impact student experiences of relationships. Students who attended boarding school for three to four years, had an increased chance of experiencing boarding school as a 'safe-haven' and that school staff were attachment figures compared to students who attended for less time (Spina et al., 2019). Students had more time to get to know school staff and were able to get to know them outside of the classroom (Spina et al., 2019).

1.1.11. Boarding School and Mental Health

Studies have shown that attending boarding school can have adverse impacts on mental health. Students who attend boarding school are at heightened risk of stress and anxiety. They also report less social-emotional wellbeing (Leonard et al., 2015; Lester et al., 2015). The impact of the school environment on mental health, relationships and academic achievement may be intensified. School counsellors, psychologists and other mental health professionals have an integral role in supporting the health and safety of boarding students, who are away from their families more than day students (Hodges et al., 2016). Despite this increased need to support students, only a small number of mental health professionals work in boarding schools (Pavletic et al., 2016). Boarding school staff play the role of both parent and health professional when caring for students' mental health needs (Van Hoof et al., 2004). However, research indicates that boarding schools typically lack a clear framework

and standards for mental health support, which could be crucial in guiding mental health professionals (McCalman et al., 2020). There is a clear requirement for research on how mental health services can best support boarding students' health, safety and school experience (Pavletic et al. 2016).

1.1.9 Limitations of Loneliness Research with Children

Some argue that the concept of loneliness does not mean much to children and therefore children cannot provide reliable accounts with respect to the subjective issue of loneliness. The American Psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan argued that "children cannot experience true loneliness until early adolescence, when they develop the need for intimacy within the context of close friendships" (cited in Asher & Paquette, 2003, page 76). Children's ability to identify the difference between being alone, being lonely and solitude has been found to increase with age, specifically between the ages of seven to 11. In one study, solitude as a valuable time of aloneness was not understood by children aged seven years old (Galanaki, 2004). Two thirds of children aged 12 years old understood solitude. As age increases, children are more able to distinguish between loneliness and solitude (Larsen, 1999). Studies which conduct research with very young children may therefore be limited. As children progress through adolescence they begin to distinguish between different characteristics of loneliness and start recognising a difference between being alone and loneliness (Rudrum, 2020).

As loneliness can be persistent and influenced by early socialization experiences, it may be the case that its impact is felt in full and reflected upon only in young adults. In his stages of psychosocial development, Erikson suggests that individuals seek companionship and love between the ages of 21 to 39. If the young adult fails to secure intimate and satisfying relationships then a sense of isolation might occur (Erikson, 1993).

1.1.10 Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development

The German-American psychologist Erik Erikson considered the human experience from birth to late adulthood and created eight categories that represented individual stages of psychological development. Each stage highlights the psychosocial conflict that can be experienced by humans within that timeframe and how humans can be shaped by the outcome of that conflict (Crain & William, 2011). Below details each stage:

1. Trust versus Mistrust – age 0 to 1.5. The infant is unsure about the world they live in and looks to their primary caregiver for dependability and care.
2. Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt – age 1.5 to 3. Children develop an awareness of personal control over physical movement and independence.
3. Initiative versus Guilt – age 3 to 5. Children assert themselves more regularly through play and social contact.
4. Confidence versus Inferiority – age 5 to 12. If the young person cannot progress the skill they feel is expected of them, then they can develop a feeling of inferiority.
5. Identity versus Role Confusion – age 12 to 18. Adolescents look for a feeling of personal identity by discovering personal values and considering future goals.
6. Intimacy versus Isolation – age 21 to 39 years. Conflict centres around forming intimate and loving connections with others.
7. Generativity versus Stagnation – age 40 to 65. The individual feels a need to create things that will outlast them.
8. Ego Integrity versus Despair – age 65+. Older adults contemplate and reflect on accomplishments and feel a greater sense of integrity if they view their life as successful.

Erikson's theory has good face validity; most people can relate to the idea of life stages through their own experiences (McLeod, 2018). It highlights the essential role that social relationships have on human development. Support for Erikson's model has been found in the loneliness literature for lonely adults across the lifespan (e.g. see Rokach, 2000; Shamsaei et al., 2014; Boldero & Moore, 1990). Research has indicated that individuals who create strong personal identities in adolescence are more equipped to develop intimate relationships in early adulthood (Noller, 1995). Critics of Erikson's theory argue that it describes the development of American or European men (Gilligan, 1993). There is also research that has found identity formation and development progress into adult years (Fadjukoff et al., 2016). There are also questions regarding the idea that one stage of development needs to happen before the other can be completed (Arnett, 2000).

1.1.11 Experiences of Loneliness in Adulthood for Ex-Boarders

In line with Erikson's Intimacy vs Isolation psychosocial stage, loneliness may be experienced and reflected upon in young adulthood. The boarding school environment may be a specific place where experiences of loneliness are first felt. These experiences may impact psychosocial development into adulthood, where loneliness continues.

So far, no study has explored experiences of loneliness in adulthood for ex-boarders. One study qualitatively explored the long-term effects of school bullying for 15 adult males, six of whom went to boarding school. Participants reported that bullying at boarding school has had long-lasting effects that have impacted how they feel about themselves into adulthood and therefore how they relate to others, with loneliness reported by some (Carlisle & Rofes, 2007). The inability to escape bullies at boarding school was significant to their experiences. As this is the only study identified that references experiences of loneliness among adult ex-boarders, the following systematic review will explore experiences of

loneliness for adults in the general population. It will reveal what common themes emerge. The current study will then explore experiences for adult ex-boarders, to see if any new or different themes emerge.

2 Systematic Review

2.1.1 Background

The existing evidence base for adult experiences of loneliness has an emphasis on experiences of loneliness in older adults; there is a dearth of evidence on what loneliness feels like for younger adults. Recent literature on experiences of loneliness for younger adults has focussed on the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Lisitsa et al., 2020) and experiences of loneliness at university (e.g.Vasileiou et al., 2019). There is also a growing evidence base on experiences of loneliness for clinical populations, for example individuals with depression (Achterbergh et al., 2020) or a physical health condition (Cooper et al., 2009). Several qualitative reviews have been conducted exploring loneliness for these specific populations of young people (e.g., see a qualitative meta-synthesis of loneliness among young people with depression by Achterbergh et al., 2020). However, there is a lack of qualitative research on experiences of loneliness for young adults in the general population, as highlighted in two recent study protocols (e.g. see Creaven et al., 2021). This systematic review aims to examine what existing qualitative evidence there is that explores lived experiences of loneliness for working age adults in the general population.

2.1.2 Method

1.1.12. Participants

Papers were included if they studied adults aged 16 to 65 in their sample. Originally, a minimum age of 18 was set for inclusion. However, an initial review of the evidence revealed

that studies set their minimum age to 16, seemingly to capture experiences of young adults leaving school and transitioning into the next part of their life (e.g., starting sixth form college or entering the labour market). Therefore, the minimum age was reduced to 16 as these data were deemed relevant. Studies using a sample older than sixty-five were excluded as they were deemed to have explored experiences in older adults. Participants taken from a non-clinical sample were included in the review. This was done so that the review represented experiences of loneliness in the general population, rather than a subset of the population with, for example, a known physical or mental health condition.

1.1.13. Condition

Studies exploring experiences of loneliness for working age adults were included whereas studies exploring experiences of loneliness with older adults or children were excluded. Studies exploring experiences of loneliness for a clinical sample (e.g., those with a mental or physical health condition) or specifically during COVID-19 were excluded. This is so that the review represented experiences from the general population during non-pandemic times (considered as exceptional circumstances at the time of the review).

1.1.14. Outcomes

Studies exploring experiences of loneliness with young adults from a non-clinical sample were used. This included studies exploring some or all of the following areas: definitions of loneliness, how loneliness feels, risk factors for loneliness, examples of loneliness, coping mechanisms, interventions to target loneliness.

1.1.15. Study Design

Qualitative studies or mixed methods studies with a qualitative arm were included in the review. Quantitative studies or the quantitative arm of a mixed method study were excluded. This enabled the review of studies exploring the lived experiences of loneliness for subjects, as opposed to studies measuring loneliness through other techniques, in line with the

aims of the review. Peer-reviewed research articles were included in the review. Opinion pieces and abstracts alone were excluded as it was not possible to compare and synthesise these with the rest of the studies in a consistent way. Studies not written or pre-translated into English were excluded.

2.1.3 Search Methods

1.1.16. Search Strategy

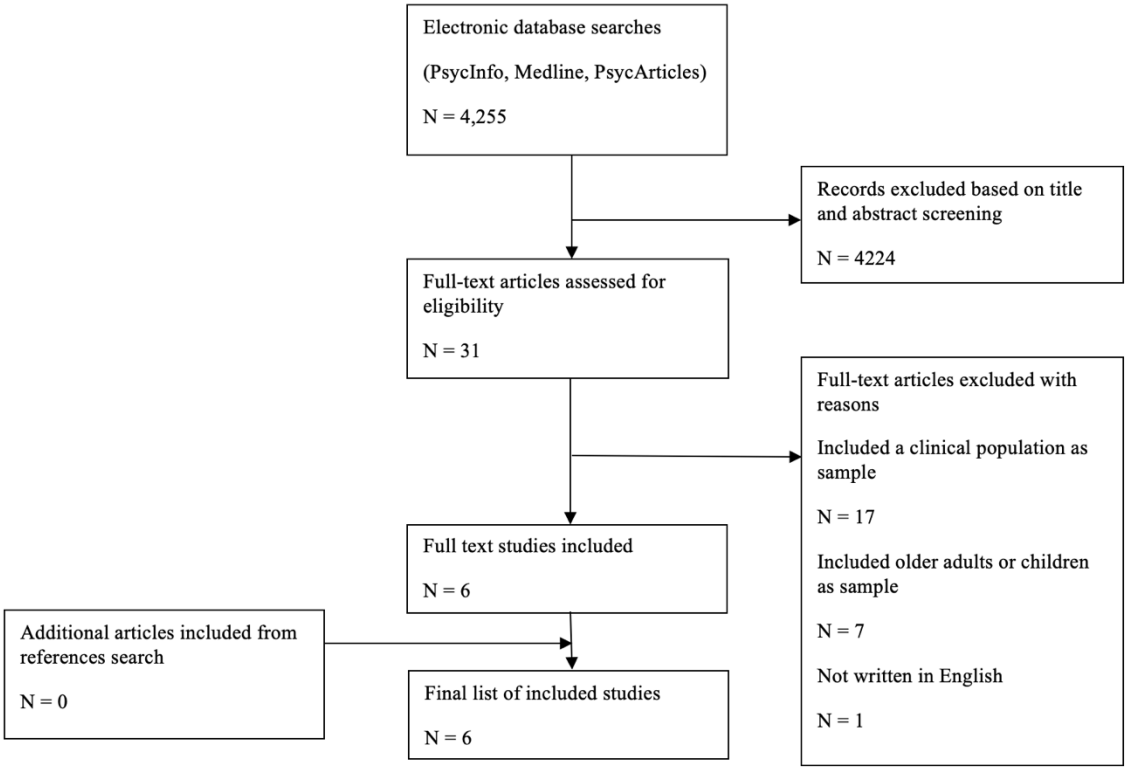
The following databases were searched electronically on 17.12.21: CINAHL Complete, PsychARTICLES, PsychINFO and Medline. These were selected as they contain relevant medical and psychological literature, including qualitative studies. The following search terms were included: “lonely” OR “loneliness” AND “adult” OR “adults” OR “adulthood” AND “general population” OR “public” OR “community”.

1.1.17. Study Selection

In total, 4,255 studies were identified from the databases stated. Titles and abstracts were screened against the eligibility criteria, which identified 31 studies for full text review. Citation searching was also conducted where reference lists were scanned for missed articles. This did not reveal any new articles. Out of the 31 studies, 6 met the eligibility criteria and were included in the review. The PRISMA diagram below demonstrates the selection process (Moher et al., & The PRISMA Group, 2009; see Figure 1).

Figure 1

PRISMA diagram of search strategy



1.1.18. Quality Appraisal

The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP; 2017) research tool was utilised to quality appraise the studies. Critical appraisal of the studies is necessary as including studies of low quality could skew the findings and result in false claims in the evidence base

(Mhaskar et al., 2009). One benefit of using the CASP is that is that it uses ten key areas of study quality to assess by, making it a thorough tool. However, a limitation is that the binary nature of the categories can make it hard to determine if a study meets the criteria by classifying using ‘yes’ or ‘no’ responses.

Critical appraisal indicated no key issues that rendered any of the studies unusable. All six studies clearly stated their research aims. Qualitatively methodology was appropriate for all six of the studies as they all aimed to explore lived experiences. Research design and data collection methods were clearly described in all of the studies and all seemed appropriate. The researcher-participant relationship was not discussed in any of the studies and it is not clear why this is. Ethical issues and approvals were addressed in all six of the studies; some in more detail than others. Data analysis was rigorous in all of the studies and the findings were clearly stated in the abstracts and main body of the reports. The wider implications of the studies are discussed in all six of the papers and it is clear how the research makes a valuable contribution to the evidence base (see Table 1 for CASP appraisal table).

Table 1

CASP critical appraisal

	Clear statement of aims?	Qualitative methodology appropriate?	Research design appropriate?	Data collection appropriate?	Researcher-participant relationship considered?	Ethical issues considered?	Data analysis rigorous?	Clear statement of finding?	Value of research?
Sundqvist & Hemberg (2021)	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Research implications clearly stated
Brown (2018)	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Research implications clearly stated
Snape & Manclossi (2018)	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Research implications clearly stated
Fardghassemi & Joffe (2021)	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Research implications clearly stated
Rokach (1988)	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Research implications clearly stated
Heu et al (2021)	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Research implications clearly stated

1.1.19. Synthesis

Thematic Synthesis (Thomas and Harden, 2008) was applied to synthesise the data. The process for this includes:

1. Coding the text
2. Identifying ‘descriptive’ themes
3. Identifying ‘analytical’ themes

The results of the review are discussed below and the key themes identified are reviewed, with similarities and differences considered.

2.1.4 Results

Table 2 lists the six studies included in the review. Eight main themes were identified, as discussed below.

Table 2

Study characteristics of included studies

Study	Country	Sample	Area being explored	Data collection	Analysis method	Main results
Sundqvist & Hemberg (2021)	Finland	11 adolescents and young adults aged 17 to 28	Examining loneliness from adolescents' and young adults' perspectives	interviews	qualitative content analysis	Risk factors for loneliness were identified as: social transitions, isolation, not having anyone to contact, group differences, social expectations, viewing other companionships, ill-being, negative emotions, former destructive experiences, or a negative self-image.
Brown (2018)	America	five adult participants aged 30 to 50	Exploring the meaning of participants' experience of loneliness while in a relationship	interviews	narrative analysis	Loneliness was retrospectively experienced. Multiple factors influence loneliness. Increasing awareness of loneliness through non-pathologizing reflection in a clinical context could enable better understanding of loneliness.
Snape & Manclossi (2018)	UK	34 young adults aged 16 to 24	Young people's perceptions and experiences of loneliness	mixed methods - questionnaire and interviews	thematic analysis	Practical social and emotional or mental barriers to participating fully in social life and activities can contribute to loneliness. Triggers to loneliness include social transitions, bereavement, disability, being bullied or mental health challenges. Suggestions for tackling loneliness are discussed.

Fardghassemi & Joffe (2021)	UK	48 young adults aged 18 to 24	experiences of loneliness	mixed methods - questionnaire and interviews	thematic analysis	Loneliness is depicted by: a sense of isolation, negative emotions and thoughts, coping and a positive orientation to aloneness. An examination of these themes showed that: one can feel isolated or excluded even when surrounded by people; the experience of loneliness is accompanied by a set of interrelated feelings and thoughts like rumination; and technological and/or non-technological outlets can be used to cope. Social media play both a positive and negative role in loneliness, and loneliness is not always experienced negatively.
Rokach (1988)	Canada	526 subjects aged 16 to 84	experiences of loneliness	verbatim reports of loneliness	content analysis	Ten factors of loneliness define and differentiate 23 components. Self-Alienation, Interpersonal Isolation, Distressed Reactions, and Agony were the main categories defined.
Heu et al. (2021)	Austria, Bulgaria, Israel, Egypt, India	42 subjects aged 24 to 45	experiences of loneliness	interviews	thematic analysis	Thematic analysis does not suggest fundamental qualitative differences in loneliness definitions, perceived causes, or remedies between cultures.

1.1.20. Theme One: Emotions Associated with Loneliness

The papers identified a number of feelings and emotions associated with loneliness. Hopelessness, anxiety, stress, emptiness and a sense of depression were the most frequently cited. Participants discussed how loneliness was often triggered by, or co-occurred, with these symptoms. Negative emotions, particularly social anxiety, were described by participants as trapping them in a vicious cycle of loneliness where they felt consumed by difficult feelings. This could lead to them internalising how they were feeling and considering themselves the problem. This would often stop them reaching out and contacting people for support, which perpetuated the loneliness further (Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021) and increased the social anxiety (Snape & Manclossi, 2018).

All of the studies discussed emotional difficulties and loneliness. However, the studies differed in the extent to which they named individual emotions or grouped them under the category of "mental health". All of the studies referenced anxiety. Sundqvist & Hemberg (2021), Fardghassemi & Joffe (2021), Brown (2018), Rokach (1988) and Heu et al (2021) referenced specific feelings and emotions (for example sadness, worry, emptiness). Snape & Manclossi (2018) referenced anxiety but group all other experiences as under 'mental health'.

1.1.21. Theme Two: Social Transitions Introduce Risk Factors for Loneliness

The papers identified that social transitions are a period of increased risk for experiencing loneliness and respondents reported increased vulnerability to loneliness during these times. These periods could be caused by a number of reasons including moving to a new town, city or country to study or work, leaving school to move to university, leaving university to move back home and moving to live independently. These periods were described as both socially and emotionally isolating times as not only did the environment change – and the people known within it – but also responsibilities changed too, which in

some cases added increased stress. Pressures of starting a job in a new location were also described as isolating as it left less time for socialising. Adjusting to new conditions alone also created a sense of isolation as there are few people in the new environment to offer support (Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021; Snape & Manclossi, 2018; Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2021)

Within the papers it was acknowledged that developing a social network is a protective factor for loneliness during a period of social transition. It was discussed how sometimes this is not possible for a number of reasons, including failing to meet like-minded people, being socially excluded by other people or being geographically isolated where it is difficult to access other people. Snape et al (2018) write that transition periods can disrupt pre-existing social relationships and can coincide with other life events and circumstances that can create a sense of disconnection and loneliness. It can impact both the quality and quantity of relationships. Fardghassemi (2021) notes that as many young adults spend a significant part of their social life on social media (Smith & Anderson, 2018), this increases the chance of feeling hypervigilant to social cues which may indicate "threat to sense of self or how they are perceived by others". This could intensify a sense of social anxiety when in a new environment, which may lead to loneliness.

1.1.22. Theme Three: Social Media and Loneliness

Three of the papers discussed social media use and loneliness (Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021; Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2021; Snape & Manclossi, 2018). Participants described how seeing friends online could trigger experiencing loneliness and how using social media is a lonely activity in itself, which can illicit further feelings of loneliness when one sees friends socialising (Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021). Passive use of social media, such as browsing without communicating with others, was linked to experiences of loneliness. It was also reported to amplify feelings of judgement that young adults experience, which may be why

they try to emphasise their popularity through their online profile (Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2021).

However, it was also noted that social media was reported to alleviate loneliness for some people, where it helped "feelings of inclusion and ability to connect with different people in different places" (Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021). It may also help to connect with new people or find people with common interests (Snape & Manclossi, 2018). Both the positive and less positive consequences of social media use and loneliness were therefore reported in the studies.

1.1.23. Theme Four: Bullying and Loneliness

Experiences of being bullied as causing loneliness at the time of the experience and as a factor influencing future relationships were discussed in several of the papers (Snape & Manclossi, 2018; Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021)**.** The papers identified how other people may be less inclined to engage with someone who is bullied, which increases that person's sense of isolation further. People who are alone and lonely may be more likely to be targets of bullying initially and the bullying keeps them even more isolated (Snape & Manclossi, 2018). It is discussed how peer victimization and bullying can lead to trust issues and social avoidance which can result in loneliness (Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021). Bullying was also described as leading people to feel that they did not want to be around people, which also led to loneliness.

Participants in both studies comment on the lasting impact that bullying can have on experiences of loneliness. Bullying was described as a "former destructive experience" (Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021) that has led to trust issues, social isolation and loneliness that have had an enduring impact on how the individual sees themselves and others. Forming

intimate relationships and bonds appeared more difficult for those who had experienced bullying earlier in life (Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021; Snape & Manclossi, 2018).

1.1.24. Theme Five: Lonely But Not Alone

All of the papers referenced how it is possible to feel lonely in the presence of others. In some papers this was described as lacking a connection to others (Rokach, 1988; Snape & Manclossi, 2018) and a general sense of disconnection (Brown, 2018). In others this was described as a form of chronic loneliness, that existed despite the existence of many loving and fulfilling relationships. This kind of 'latently present' loneliness was described as being present in specific situations (Heu et al., 2021) and was considered a paradoxical experience, especially when it was being felt in the presence of a close other, such as a partner, sibling or spouse (Brown, 2018).

1.1.25. Theme Six: Loneliness is Stigmatised

Four out of six of the studies discussed the stigma surrounding loneliness and how this can make loneliness hard to acknowledge to oneself and other people. Social expectations around having a lot of friends and socialising frequently were reported to increase feelings of shame about admitting to feeling lonely, people perceiving it to be a form of personal failure. Being lonely without a partner can be interpreted to mean that the given person is not worthy of a partner or cannot attract one. This can be viewed by society as a failing (Rokach, 1988). One of the papers discussed how the pain and stigma of loneliness makes researching loneliness difficult, as individuals are hesitant to admit that they have been or are lonely (Brown, 2018). One study categorised the feelings of embarrassment, shame and humiliation that are reported by the lonely as 'Discomposure' (Rokach 1988). Another paper discussed how loneliness was reported to be recognised only retrospectively by subjects (Brown, 2018) which may be linked to the stigma around admitting that you are lonely.

1.1.26. Theme Seven: Coping

All of the studies addressed ways to cope with loneliness. Participants described the measures that they used to reduce feelings of loneliness. Accepting that the feeling is temporary, adaptation, employing a positive mindset, seeing family and friends, staying busy with activities, reaching out to support networks, using easy access therapy, covering it up to pretend it doesn't exist and "forgiving and forgetting" former unhealthy relationships were techniques described in the studies (Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021; Snape & Manclossi, 2018). Staying alone, was also given as a coping strategy for loneliness in several studies (Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2021; Heu et al., 2021). Reasons for this included a decreased pressure to need to put on a persona, as was the fear of being judged by others (Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2021). It also meant that individuals focussed more on fulfilling solitary activities which were deemed more effective at reducing loneliness in the long term (Heu et al., 2021) and enabled individuals to reflect on what makes them happy (Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2021). Several participants reported that reducing the amount of socialising they did, so that they spent more time with fewer people with whom they had a more meaningful relationship, was an effective coping strategy for loneliness (Heu et al., 2021).

Technology was also reported to be a key coping mechanism in one study. Listening to music, watching TV, looking at one's phone and browsing the internet or social media were all given as technological coping strategies (Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2021). Online coping with loneliness was seen to reflect an extension of offline coping in that young adults seek family and friends both online and offline to cope with loneliness. Technological platforms to distract from loneliness were found to be effective coping strategies in the short term but not in the long term (Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2021).

Employing a positive mindset, staying busy with activities and reaching out to support networks were the most commonly cited coping mechanisms across the studies (Sundqvist &

Hemberg, 2021; Snape, & Manclossi, 2018; Brown, 2018; Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2021; Rokach, 1988; Heu et al., 2021).

1.1.27. Theme Eight: Tackling Loneliness

Most of the studies discussed interventions and strategies that could be employed to tackle loneliness. These seemed to be influenced by the coping strategies reported to be most effective by respondents. Creating a culture of openness about loneliness, creating chances for social connections, inspiring positive social media use and supporting young adults to understand loneliness were suggested interventions for tackling loneliness in some of the papers (Snape & Manclossi, 2018; Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2021). Activities that foster a sense of purpose were suggested to be provided by the government, for example, volunteering opportunities (Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2021). The need for the healthy use of social media was also suggested to be included within the curriculum along with the provision of CBT delivered within schools, which may help with negative emotions associated with loneliness (Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2021).

Studies highlighted the variation of responses to loneliness and the subjective nature of experiences of loneliness. Participants spoke of the need to get the balance between spending time alone versus with other people right. This can be hard to achieve and differs person to person (Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021). Therefore, interventions will need to address the unique set of factors contributing towards distress for each individual (Rokach, 1988). Increasing awareness of loneliness experiences occurring for oneself and others may enable an enhanced understanding of loneliness feelings, particularly if it is discussed in a non-pathologising way (Brown, 2018) which may, in turn, better inform interventions. This may be easier to achieve if experiencing loneliness was more normalised (Sundqvist & Hemberg, 2021).

2.1.5 Discussion

The studies identified discussed experiences of loneliness for younger adults in the general population. Risk factors for loneliness were mentioned, including periods of social transition, bullying, stigma and social media use. Participants discussed how loneliness feels for them. A range of emotions were described and a number of common feelings were identified such as anxiety, stress, emptiness and a sense of depression. All of the studies addressed how respondents acknowledged that it is possible to feel lonely without being alone. The stigma surrounding loneliness, and how this impacts conversations about loneliness was addressed in the majority of studies. Some common coping strategies were given across the studies but there was also vast variation in the coping strategies described by participants. For example, some people explained that social media made them feel lonely yet others stated that it helped them to feel more connected. This variation likely reflects the unique and subjective nature of loneliness.

Whilst there were many similarities in how loneliness was reported to be experienced across the studies, the review also identified a number of inconsistencies in experiences of loneliness. It is clear that loneliness feels different for different people, not only in the emotions that it elicits but also in the duration of time it is experienced for – for some, it seems chronic and recurrent and for others, it seems brief. Some of the studies suggested interventions that placed the individual responsible for change, for example, reaching out and seeking support from contacts. Others suggested that schools and the UK government should be offering young people support to help alleviate loneliness, for example through education. It is clear that coping with loneliness is dependent upon on a range of factors that differ for each individual, such as proximity to potential friends and support from reliable people at the time of feeling lonely.

A limitation of the review is that it includes papers with sample aged 16. This is younger than the target sample of the current study, which seeks to explore loneliness for those aged 21 to 39, in line with Erikson's psychosocial stage. This may reduce the ability of the systemic review to demonstrate how earlier life experiences impact loneliness in adulthood, as some of the participants are still children. However, only two papers out of six included participants younger than 18. Furthermore, this enabled inclusion of these studies which also sampled participants over 18 years of age.

2.1.6 Aims and Objectives of the Current Study

Literature indicates that loneliness can be persistent (Junttila et al., 2016) and influenced by early socialisation experiences (Arslan, 2021). The above systematic review revealed a number of factors that influence adult experiences of loneliness, including social transitions, bullying, stigma and social media use. Other than the six studies identified above, there is a lack of qualitative research offering insight into the lived experiences of adult loneliness in the general population. Furthermore, whilst research has been conducted on student experiences of loneliness during school, the enduring impact that the school environment may have had on loneliness is yet to be considered. Boarding school students may be particularly vulnerable to loneliness at school and also vulnerable to other early-life factors that can lead to persistence of loneliness into adulthood (e.g., separation from parents). Therefore, this study aims to investigate experiences of loneliness in a group of adults who had attended boarding school. In line with Erikson's "Isolation versus Intimacy" psychosocial stage, adults aged 21 to 39 will be interviewed. Interplay between the home and school environment will be considered. The study will use semi-structured interviews to ask the following research question:

What is the impact of attending boarding school upon experiences of loneliness in adulthood?

3 Methods Chapter

3.1.1 Chapter Summary

The following chapter will explore the ontological and epistemological stance of qualitative research as well as explaining the study design, procedure, data collection and analytical technique employed. Ethical considerations and how the study will be disseminated will also be considered.

3.1.2 Epistemological Positioning

1.1.28. Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative methodologies seek to understand a 'social reality' (Silverman, 2013) through taking an inductive stance. This means that hypotheses are formed through the observation and exploration of individual, societal and cultural behaviours and experiences (Bryman, 2003). There are a number of different qualitative techniques, which can take distinct epistemological positions to analyse and understand data. Quantitative methodologies differ from qualitative methodologies in that they take a positivist stance, where theories are tested through experimentation and statistical techniques to understand cause and effect (Creswell, 1994).

The merits and limitations of qualitative analysis compared to quantitative have been considered for many years. It can be argued that qualitative methodologies lack reliability and validity through the use of small and homogenous samples (Creswell 1994; Silverman 2013). Consequently this can reduce the generalisability of results. Larger sample sizes are usually achieved with quantitative methodologies as surveys can be quick and easy to

administer to many people, the result being that the information gained may be representative of the population under scrutiny. However, quantitative data fails to capture nuanced details of individual experiences, offering a breadth of understanding as opposed to in-depth understanding of the views of a particular group (Patton, 2002). As the aim of the current study was to understand the lived experiences of loneliness in individuals who attended boarding school, a qualitative approach was employed; however it is acknowledged that results may be less generalizable to a broad population.

1.1.29. Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology can be defined as the 'nature of being' and is an area of metaphysics that discusses the form and shape of reality (Merriam-Webster, 2020). This research takes a critical realist ontological approach in that it considers the experiences of individuals, as expressed in relation to their personal 'reality'. Burr (2015) notes that an individual's 'reality' is informed over time through their unique experiences of society. In this study, this 'reality' includes people's experiences of life at boarding school and the years that follow, making a critical realist approach appropriate to use as it is versatile in accommodating varied responses from participants.

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy which considers how knowledge can be acquired (Pocock, 2015) and is considered to be the 'theory of knowing' (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020). In keeping with the critical realist ontological stance, this research adopts the critical realist epistemological position (Robson, 2002) of acknowledging that subjective experiences impact each individual's experience of 'reality' and 'truth'. Leibruck notes that a phenomenon being investigated can be uniform across a group but is a unique experience for each individual, according to their societal viewpoints (Leibruck 2001, as cited in Burr, 2003). Willig (2012) suggests that an individual's 'reality' can be better appreciated when

there is an understanding of the social environment in which an individual has developed, known as 'contextualism' (Willig, 2012). This study aimed to explore and understand common themes and 'truths' for individuals who attended boarding school and have experienced feeling lonely. As boarding school is a unique socialization environment, taking a critical realist position that considers the impact of this context on each participant is highly fitting.

Qualitative Methods

A number of qualitative methodologies were considered when designing the current project. These are explained and discussed below.

1.1.30. Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory is a systematic qualitative method where hypotheses and theories are constructed through data collection and analysis (Faggiolani, 2011). It uses inductive reasoning, where theories emerge from the data set and are not purposefully guided by previous research. The technique is considered to be very open and fluid, which means it can be time consuming to conduct. The current thesis required review of the existing literature on boarding school and loneliness. It was also time limited within the three year clinical psychology training course. In light of these factors, grounded theory was not selected.

1.1.31. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a further qualitative technique that was considered. It aims to offer insight into how an individual makes sense of a phenomenon given their specific experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015). It has a focus on idiographic meaning making for individual participants, which makes it very interpretive. Sample sizes

are usually very small because participants are invited to participate as they are known to have specific insight into the topic area (Reid et al., 2005). Given the limited research that exists on experiences of loneliness and boarding school, it was decided that a larger sample of participants that could offer a broader range of views on the subject area would be more appropriate. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was therefore not used.

1.1.32. Thematic Analysis

This study used thematic analysis with an aim to explore if attending boarding school impacts experiences of loneliness. Thematic analysis (TA) involves analysis of information through exploring and recording data relevant to a defined research question and phenomenon under investigation (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is a technique which synthesises large amounts of qualitative data from study participants into a set of meaningful codes and then themes. (Boyatzis, 1998). Themes emerge throughout the process of analysis which are grounded in the data, making it an inductive approach. The benefit of this approach is that it reduces bias in that it prevents any pre-established beliefs held by the lead researcher from being perpetuated (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It enables the participants' true experiences to be heard, as they are not influenced to respond in a way that is led by existing literature. It also prevents assumptions and biases within the evidence base being spread. Thematic analysis is not linked to any individual epistemological position which Braun and Clark (2006) argue mean it can be applied more flexibly.

Critical realism is consistent with a thematic analytical method as it recognises that 'truth' can exist between a number of individuals. However, as mentioned above, experiences in common can affect individuals in different ways. Truths gather significance with repeated occurrence which is why thematic analysis can be considered 'saliency analysis' as proposed by Buetow's (2010). The aim of the study was to understand shared themes amongst

individuals who attended boarding school and have experienced feeling lonely. The themes were identified by taking an inductive approach, driven by data as opposed to specific theories. They were described semantically, and once identified, they were considered within the context of society and history, along with existing evidence and relevant theories (Willig, 2012). A Study by Jovicic & McPherson (2020) explored GPs' views and experiences of loneliness within their older adult population of patients using thematic analysis. This successfully revealed four overarching themes and a number of subthemes that helped shed light on training needs for GPs in the area of loneliness, using a sample of 19 GPs. As the current study shares similar aims, thematic analysis should also work appropriately in finding meaningful themes.

1.1.33. The Researcher Position Statement

When conducting thematic analysis it is imperative that the researcher consider their role in the analytical development (Braun and Clark, 2006). This is because, in accordance with the critical realist stance, the contextual position of the researcher can impact how the data is viewed, reflected upon and analysed. It may be the case that parts of the researcher's position is unknown and is consequently not considered (Pilgrim, 2017). These unconscious elements may come into consciousness through the research process and how they approach data analysis (Bhaskar et al., 1998).

I am a 30 year old White British female who grew up in a village in Surrey from the age of five years old. I was born in Hemel Hempstead and lived in Reading before moving to Surrey. I have one sister who is 31 years old and works as a teacher in London where she lives with her husband. I currently live in London with two friends. My parents are both retired; previously, my mother worked as a teacher in a number of state schools and later

retrained as a counsellor, working as a school counsellor for some time. My father was a geologist.

I went to my local state secondary school where I made close friends, many of whom I am still friends with now. I enjoyed secondary school but found revising for exams stressful; teaching at my school was often disrupted by students with behavioural needs. Consequently, I spent a lot of time in the library self-teaching GCSE material. My father often spent late nights going through school work with me as I was anxious to do well in my exams. My secondary school did not have a sixth form so my class mates and I moved to a sixth form college and interacted with students who had previously been privately educated. I found learning about the differences between private schools and state schools fascinating.

After completing my A-Levels in 2010 I attended the University of Nottingham to study psychology. Here I found myself in halls of residence with students, the majority of whom, had attended fee-paying private or boarding schools. At times I found it hard to 'fit-in' as I was unable to share stories about my boarding house and other aspects of the boarding school experience. I became part of a group of 20 friends and was one of two people who had attended state school in this group. Over time I learnt more and more about life at boarding school from these friends. I noticed differences in how these friends interacted, communicated and spent their time compared to the friends I had from school. I decided to complete the third year of my degree in Mexico, where I enjoyed the advantages of meeting people of different ethnicity and culture.

After graduating, I moved to London where I lived with friends from university. I secured a job in social research for the Work and Health Unit, which is a government department co-run by the Department of Health and the Department for Work and Pensions. Here I worked on the Joe Cox Loneliness Commission, reviewing the evidence base for

research on loneliness. I also worked as an NHS Assistant Psychologist before starting the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology at the University of Essex.

I believe my interest in psychology came from growing up in a very open and communicative family. Both of my parents demonstrated the value of having a strong work ethic and this instilled the determination needed for me to pursue a career in clinical psychology. As my mother and sister are both teachers, the education system was a common conversation topic in our household. My interest in boarding school research developed as a result of the friends I made at university and how intrigued I was by the differences in our living environments when growing up. I often questioned how living at home compared to living at school impacted upon how we were developing as adults. I noticed that many of my friends from boarding school went on to secure graduate schemes in organisations that kept them protected in a bubble with other graduates from Russell Group Universities. I observed that my friends from state schools appeared to be pursuing more independent career paths. I also noticed how my friends from boarding school appeared to strongly dislike being alone. Having lived in Nottingham and London with a number of them, I had observed them filling up their lives with constant activities and social events. This seemed to contrast with my own life, where the balance of time spent with others versus time spent alone was much more even. Solitude seemed like a positive experience for me and a negative experience for them. This initially sparked thoughts I had about the link between attending boarding school and experiencing loneliness in adulthood.

My interest in loneliness also stemmed from the research I had read during my time working in Government Social Research. I experienced feeling extremely lonely when living in Mexico, which had been confusing as I had left to escape an intense social situation in Nottingham. I therefore felt a sense of excitement when developing my ideas for this

research project, as it combined several topics that were personally and professionally interesting to me.

When designing the project, I noticed that a number of assumptions I had about boarding school kept coming into my mind. As a result of attending state school and having a positive experience academically and socially, I have had a tendency to position private and boarding school as ‘bad’ and state school as ‘good’. Politically, I have always questioned if the two tier education system underpins much of the social disparity within the UK. Furthermore, I have watched my friends from boarding school constantly grapple with difficulties being alone; solitude always seemed distressing for them. As a result of these factors, it has been important that I conduct this research from a neutral stance and take an unbiased perspective when using the topic guide and analysing the data.

Further reflections I have about the project include an acknowledgement that there are many positive aspects surrounding attending boarding school. There are many opportunities academically, socially and for extra-curricular activities. I also acknowledge that difficult experiences described by participants in the project may be influenced by factors outside of boarding school. The feelings that have arisen for me whilst conducting this research, and how this may have affected data analysis, are discussed in the discussion section of this report.

3.1.3 Design

As discussed above, the qualitative methodology of thematic analysis was used to explore the impact of attending boarding school on experiences of loneliness in a group of adult ex-boarders. Reflections on any experiences of loneliness at boarding school and in adulthood were explored. Friendships and victimisation were also discussed, as well as

strategies employed to cope with social difficulties and loneliness, in both of its forms. Themes related to boarding school that are relevant to experiences of loneliness were recorded, as well as demographic information for each participant.

Thematic analysis was considered an appropriate approach to use as the objective of the study was to understand the individual lived experiences of attending boarding school and any experiences of loneliness. This is in line with the critical realist position. It was crucial that participants were able to give an account of their experiences in their own words, through their unique viewpoint.

3.1.4 Research Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via video conferencing by the lead researcher at a mutually convenient time. The lead researcher conducted all of the interviews. A common criticism of a quantitative approach to semi-structured interviewing is that categorical response options result in data minimisation (Smith et al., 1995). Therefore a qualitative approach was used which was flexible to capture themes that came from individual narratives but also had some structure to help guide the interviews (Robson, 2002).

Participants were adult ex-boarders in the community, aged between 21 to 39, who confirmed that they had experienced loneliness at some point their life. Individuals were invited to complete qualitative interviews exploring the impact of boarding school on experiences of loneliness. Participants were recruited through the lead researcher purposively emailing a study invitation (Appendix A), information sheet (Appendix B), consent form (Appendix C) and recruitment poster (Appendix D) to existing friends and colleagues who attended boarding school. The information sheet included information on the research purpose, interview procedure, inclusion and exclusion criteria, limits of confidentiality, data

collection and storage, right to withdraw, consent for publication and lead researcher contact details. Individuals who were prepared to participate in the research and met the inclusion criteria detailed in the information sheet, chose to opt-in by emailing the signed consent form back to the lead researcher. The lead researcher then contacted them via email or telephone to book in their interview and answer any questions. Participants were emailed a link and password to join a Zoom meeting with the lead researcher. They were encouraged to find a quiet and confidential space to complete the interview in confidence.

Boarding schools were not contacted and used to recruit ex-boarders as the lead researcher already had access to a large pool of ex-boarders to sample from through friends and colleagues. Participants were able to refer suitable contacts that they knew to take part in the study. In this instance, a recruitment poster detailing the lead researcher's email address was given to participants and circulated so contacts could request an invitation to the study. This sampling technique is known as Snowball Sampling. (See Figure 2 for a flow diagram of the recruitment process).

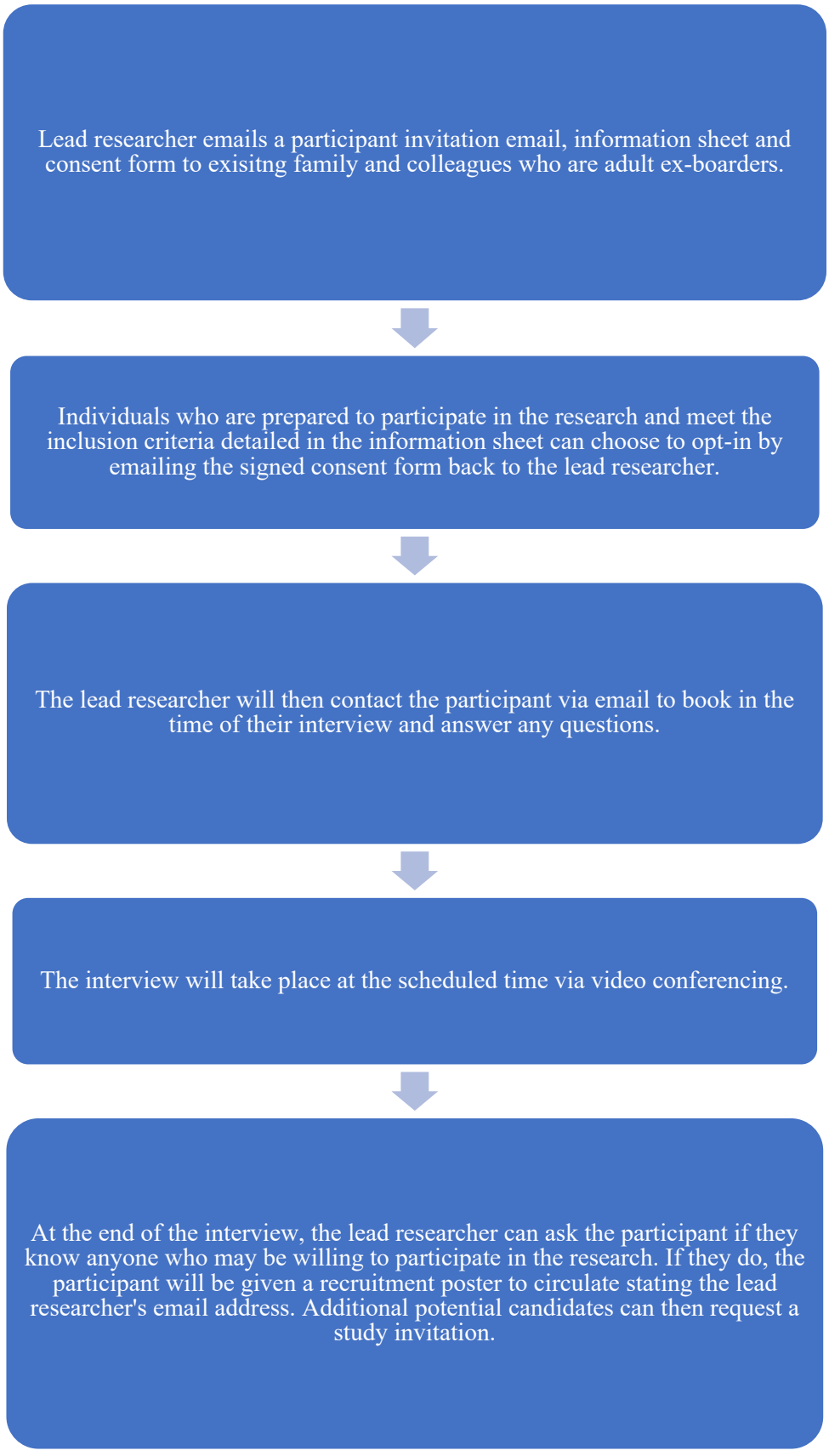
Psychotherapists in the field, including Nick Duffell and Joy Schaverien, were also contacted and informed of the study. They were asked if they were aware of any individuals who may be interested in taking part in the study and were sent the recruitment poster so it could be sent on to relevant contacts. This did not recruit any participants into the study. Recruitment was further facilitated by colleagues conducting similar research in the field who have access to appropriate potential participants who could be informed about the study. No further participants were recruited through this means.

Interviews were audio recorded using an encrypted Dictaphone. After each interview the audio files were transferred from the Dictaphone device to the University of Essex secure drive on a computer and stored in password protected files using anonymous identifiers to

protect confidentiality. Identifiable information was removed from transcripts at the point of transcription by the lead researcher.

Figure 2

Flow Diagram of Recruitment Process



3.1.5 Measures

1.1.34. Materials

The interview transcript was designed by the lead researcher, in collaboration with project supervisors. It was designed in line with the aims of the research and to address the research question of: *What is the impact of attending boarding school on experiences of loneliness in adulthood?* Previous literature that had used a qualitative thematic analysis design was consulted to help guide the development of the interview transcript (Lauryn, 2012). This helped shape the structure of the interview. The interview started with an introduction section (detailing consent, confidentiality and project objectives) and progressed to the demographic variables being collected and the main interview questions. The final question led to the interview closing followed by an interview debrief. The debrief was used to thank the participant for their time, ask how they found the interview, reiterate how their data would be used and confirm if the participant would like to receive a copy of the thesis. All participants were asked if they had any feedback on the interview or the recruitment process. In the interest of their wellbeing, participants were reminded that they have been provided with the telephone numbers for the Samaritans and Mind in the event that they felt distressed.

The interview transcript was formed of semi-structured questions which were open ended. It was created to be flexible and consisted of three key question areas: 1. Experiences of loneliness in adulthood, 2. Loneliness during boarding school and 3. Relationships during boarding school. Additional prompts were used when needed to aid further exploration of participants' responses. These prompts focussed on the duration of the loneliness experienced, why the loneliness could have developed, how severe the loneliness was, the coping mechanisms used to manage loneliness, friendships and experiences of bullying at

boarding school and in adulthood. The lead researcher was flexible in the approach to interviewing and tried to use language that helped make the participant feel at ease. When exploring information that had been given by the participant, the lead researcher repeated language that had been used by the participant, to help them feel understood. As video conferencing was used, eye contact and body language could also be used to help the participant to feel relaxed during the interview.

One pilot interview was conducted and recorded to assess roughly how long the interviews would take to complete and to ensure questions were understandable. The pilot participant was asked for feedback on the transcript which resulted in several small amendments being made. The final transcript was produced by the lead researcher and discussed with the project supervisors. (See Appendix E for final transcript). It was anticipated that it may be challenging to keep the interview to time as participants may use the space to reflect considerably on their experiences of loneliness and their time at boarding school. Most interviews kept to time of around 45 minutes to one hour.

Demographic information was also collected at the point of interview to enable the lead researcher to under the characteristics of the sample. Variables included age, sex, ethnicity, relationship status, employment status, offspring, who the participant currently lived with, type of boarding school attended (single or mixed sex), age at first attendance at boarding school, past or current experiences of psychological support or psychotherapy and any mental health diagnoses.

NVivo 12 software was used to code the data. This was downloaded from the University of Essex Software Hub (see Appendix H).

3.1.6 Method of Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to analyse the transcripts, where codes and themes evolved throughout the process of analysis. Transcription was completed manually by

the lead researcher. Themes related to boarding school that are relevant to experiences of loneliness were recorded. Supervision was used to ensure the themes identified by the lead researcher during analysis were grounded in the data. NVivo 12 software was used to code the data.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) principles for conducting reflexive thematic analysis were followed, which use the six phases outlined below. Analysis was a fluid and iterative process where steps were revisited at times. The lead researcher also revisited the topic guides continually.

Phase One: Data familiarisation took place in phase one, where the lead researcher read the data repeatedly to become completely familiar with the material, in particular with any initial themes that occurred. These initial themes and patterns were written down and the research objectives were re-read.

Phase Two: Initial codes were generated that attempted to describe the content of the data and related to the research objectives. This process reduced the data down. Attention was given to all of the data throughout this stage to prevent unequal attention being given to initial key themes.

Phase Three: Codes were combined to form broad themes that described the data. The end result was a list of themes for further analysis. Themes were not fixed at this stage; instead they were initial groups of codes.

Phase Four: Themes were reviewed by considering how the data support the themes. Some themes failed to have enough data to support them in a meaningful way; these were collapsed and data were used to support other themes. Distinctive differences between themes began to develop in this phase.

Phase Five: Themes were named and defined during this stage. How each theme contributes to our understanding of the data and why this is interesting was also recorded.

Phase Six: The final phase involved reporting the themes that were identified and why they make meaningful sense of the data. Quotes from the interview transcripts were also inserted to demonstrate what was found.

As recommended by Braun and Clark (2006), the lead researcher kept a detailed account of how the codes and themes developed throughout the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This was called a 'reflexivity journal' and was kept to acknowledge the role that the lead researcher took in the analysis. It was important to describe how the researcher's reflections and choices on how they have interpreted the data influenced the research.

A total of 18 individuals were interviewed. The final few interviews did not produce any new themes within the dataset. It was therefore felt that data saturation had been reached. This is in line with Lyons and Coyle (2007) who state that a suitable sample size has been reached at the point of 'thematic saturation'.

3.1.7 Participants

There are limited guidelines available on how to determine a sample size for Thematic Analysis. Six has been stated as a minimum (Smith and Eatough, 2007); eight to 20 has also been suggested to be appropriate (Bird, 2005). Braun and Clark (2013) recommend a sample of around 15 – 20. This is a large sample size compared to other qualitative techniques. However, this is necessary as thematic analysis explores themes across multiple interviews. Table 3 includes descriptive demographic data for the participants whose data was included in the analysis. It was decided that the pilot data would be included in the final

data set as the interview transcript was not edited significantly post-pilot, so pilot data were still relevant.

Homogenous samples are often used in qualitative analysis, to enable the researcher to capture a particular phenomenon relevant to a group of individuals (Noon, 2017). Therefore the study considered the following criteria when sampling.

1.1.35. Inclusion Criteria:

Participants were ex-boarders from a variety of boarding schools who confirmed that they have experienced loneliness at some point in their life and opted-in to completing an interview by returning an opt-in sheet that had been emailed to them. They were aged between 21 to 39. This was in line with Erikson's stage of psychosocial development, 'Intimacy versus Isolation' (Erikson, 1993), which takes place during these years of adulthood. Participants were English speaking as this is the only language spoken by the lead researcher.

1.1.36. Exclusion Criteria:

Individuals who have never experienced feeling lonely could not take part in the study. For ethical reasons, participants currently experiencing psychological problems that may be impacted by participation in the interview were asked to self-exclude through the participant information sheet.

1.1.37. Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development

As discussed in the Introduction, loneliness can be persistent and influenced by early socialization experiences. Therefore it may be the case that its impact is only felt in full and reflected upon in middle adulthood. In his stages of psychosocial development, Erikson

suggests that individuals seek companionship and love between the ages of 21 to 39. If the young adult fails to secure intimate and satisfying relationships then a sense of isolation might occur (Erikson, 1993). This 'Intimacy versus Isolation' stage of psychosocial development provided a rationale for the age range used and is reflected upon in the discussion.

3.1.8 Ethical Issues

Ethical approval was gained from the University of Essex via the online Ethics Review Application and Management System. This required that an online application form was completed by the lead researcher. This was sent to the Primary Supervisor and then on to the departmental Ethics Officer for approval. The Thesis Proposal was sent alongside the application.

Official standards were adhered to throughout the project, including the Health and Care Professionals Council standards (HCPC, 2016) and The British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014).

3.1.9 Informed Consent

A Consent Form and Participant Information Sheet were emailed to participants at the point that they were invited to take part in the study. These detailed that research participation is voluntary and that the interview can stop at any time without reason. Participants were asked to read both forms and ask the lead researcher if they had any questions. To opt-in to participate in the study participants emailed the signed consent form to the lead researcher. Consent was gained again verbally at the point of interview.

3.1.10 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Anonymity and confidentiality were referenced in the participant information sheet and discussed again verbally before the interview began. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the project and measures were put in place to minimise risk of data breach, in line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Information Commissioners Office, 2018). The lead researcher anonymised the data at the point of transcription and participants were assigned a pseudonym linked to their real name that was held securely in a password protected file. Interview recordings were moved from the encrypted Dictaphone and stored on a laptop in a password protected file. The interviewer explained that in line with the University's Research Data Management Policy, it is recommended that research data is kept in a data archive for a period of ten years after project completion and made available for access and re-use where legally, ethically and commercially appropriate. It was also explained that after ten years the data will be electronically deleted. The possibility of research publication was referenced in the participant information sheet and discussed again verbally after the interview was completed. It was explained that respondents would be unidentifiable in any published documents. Quotations included in the final report were checked with the participants over email, to ensure that they have been included within the appropriate context. Respondents were made aware that they can request a copy of the results. Consent to participate in the research was gained by participants signing a consent form that they were emailed at the point of invitation to participate in the study and emailing it back to the lead researcher.

3.1.11 Risk Management

A risk assessment was conducted prior to the project beginning. This identified a number of risks, detailed below, that were mitigated through risk management plans. These

risks were logged in a risk assessment form and submitted in the ethics application (see Appendix F for risk management sheet).

1.1.38. Psychological Distress for Participants

It was acknowledged that participants may feel distressed during and after answering questions about their personal experiences of loneliness. They may also have been subject to, or witnessed, abuse and bullying at boarding school which they may have found distressing to reflect on. To help manage this risk, participants were provided with the telephone numbers of the support lines run by the Samaritans and MIND (the mental health charity) in the participant information sheet. Distress was monitored throughout the interview by the interviewer, who could see the participant during the video call. The interviewer could use their clinical skills to recognise any signs of discomfort. Participants were informed that the interview could stop at any point without reason. At the end of the interview a debrief took place where participants were asked how they found the interview and if they had any questions. They were also reminded of the telephone numbers for the support organisations detailed in the information sheet. Individuals were asked to self-exclude if they were experiencing current or historical mental health difficulties that meant study participation could be distressing for them.

1.1.39. Psychological Distress for the Interviewer

It was also acknowledged that the interviewer could become distressed as a result of listening to the difficulties experienced by the participants. The interviews did not cause any distress for the interviewer.

3.1.12 Dissemination

The thesis will be edited to form a chapter for a book on "Psychological Impacts of Boarding School" to be published by Routledge in 2023 and edited by Cavenagh, McPherson and Ogden. Key researchers in the fields of both loneliness and boarding school will be emailed a summary of the work. The research may also contribute to a book on boarding school research.

The research findings will likely be of interest to mental health practitioners and groups offering support to ex and current boarding school students and individuals experiencing loneliness. Suitable contacts from the following organisations and charities will be sent a summary of the findings via email: UK Council for Psychotherapy, Counselling Directory, Victim Support, Boarding Concern, Boarding School Survivors, Boarding Recovery, The Jo Cox Foundation for Loneliness. Contacts from The Department for Education and the Department of Health will also be approached via email with research findings as well as the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, which leads the Government's Loneliness Agenda. The abstract will also be submitted for potential presentation at Boarding School conferences, for example 'Boarding School Syndrome: The Psychological Trauma(s) of 'Privileged' Children', run by nscience UK, or at training programmes such as 'The Un-Making of Them' A Diploma Training in Specialist Psychotherapy with Ex-Boarders at post-graduate level, run by Boarding School Survivors. Participants who opted-in to receive the results through the consent form will be emailed a summary of the findings.

4 Results

4.1.1 Introduction

The following chapter will summarise the results of the study. Demographic characteristics of the sample are described, followed by the characteristics of participants' boarding school experiences. These include how long subjects boarded for, the type of boarding school they attended and whether family members also attended boarding school. A reflective diary was written after each interview was conducted. Key notes from the diary are discussed. The five main themes and 13 sub-themes found through thematic analysis, are then described and discussed. The themes address different perspectives on loneliness. They consider how participants report hiding their vulnerabilities at boarding school and how this behaviour has perpetuated into adulthood for some. Navigating leaving boarding school, and the impact that this has had on loneliness, is explored. Different coping strategies to manage loneliness both at school and in adulthood are considered. Finally, the impact of relationships with family members on experiences of loneliness is discussed.

4.1.2 Demographics

In total, 18 ex-boarders were recruited into the study. Participant demographics are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3

Demographic characteristics of the sample

Participant Number	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Employment Status	Relationship Status	Children	Received Psychological Support Before?
1	31	M	White British	Employed	Married	No	No
2	31	M	White British	Employed	Single	No	No
3	29	M	White British	Employed	Engaged	No	No
4	22	M	White British	Unemployed	Single	No	No
5	31	M	White British	Employed	Single	No	No
6	27	M	White British	Employed	Single	No	Counselling and CBT
7	29	F	White British	Employed	Married	Pregnant	No
8	28	F	White British	Employed	Single	No	No
9	29	F	White British	Employed	In a Relationship	No	No
10	29	F	White British	Employed	Engaged	No	No
11	27	F	White British	Employed	In a Relationship	No	No
12	28	F	White British	Employed	Engaged	No	Counselling
13	29	F	White British	Employed	In a Relationship	No	Counselling and CBT
14	29	F	White British	Employed	Single	No	Counselling
15	28	F	White British	Employed	Engaged	No	CBT
16	27	F	White British	Employed	Engaged	No	No
17	31	F	White British	Self-employed, Full-time Student	Single	No	CBT
18	28	F	White British	Employed	In a Relationship	No	No

Note: M = male, F = female, CBT = Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

In addition, data were collected on the characteristics of how participants boarded. This can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4

Characteristics of boarding history

Participant Number	Currently Lives With	Age Starting and Leaving BS	Number of Years Boarding	Number of BSs Attended	Did Parent/s Attend BS?	Did Sibling/s Attend BS?	Type of BS	Boarding Status
1	Wife	9 to 11	2	1	Yes	No	Mixed	Full Boarder/ Flexi
2	Alone	7 to 11.5	4.3	1	Yes	No	Mixed	Full Boarder
3	Fiancé	13 to 18	5	1	No	No	Mixed	Part-Week
4	Brother	13 to 18	5	1	No	No	Mixed	Full Boarder
5	Friend	7 to 8, 11 to 18	9	2	Yes	Yes	Mixed	Full Boarder
6	Friends	11to 18	7	2	Yes	Yes	All Boys	Flexi
7	Husband	11to 18	7	1	No	Yes	All Girls	Full Boarder
8	Friend	11 to 18	7	1	Yes	Yes	All Girls	Weekly Boarder
9	Siblings	14 to 18	4	1	No	Yes	Mixed	Flexi and Full Boarder
10	Fiancé	13 to 18	5	1	Yes	Yes	Mixed	Full Boarder
11	Friends	13 to 18	5	1	Yes	Yes	Mixed	Full Boarder
12	Fiancé	5 to 18	6	1	No	Yes	Mixed	Day and Full Boarder
13	Boyfriend	14 to 18	4	1	Yes	Yes	All Girls	Weekly Boarder
14	Alone	9 to 13	9	1	No	No Siblings	Mixed	Full Boarder
15	Fiancé	16 to 18	2	1	No	No	All Girls	Weekly
16	Fiancé/ Lodger	12 to 18	6	1	No	Yes	Mixed	Weekly
17	Alone	11 to 16, 16 to 18	7	2	Yes	Yes	Mixed	Full Boarder
18	Family	7 to 11, 11 to 18	11	2	Yes	Yes	Mixed	Full Boarder

The sample was unevenly distributed in terms of sex, with six men and 12 women participating. Age ranged from 22 to 31; the mean age was 28.5 years old. All of the sample identified as White British. The age that people started boarding school ranged from seven to 16; the mean age was 10.8. Some people boarded for a number of years and then changed to day school student status but the majority boarded until they were 18 years old. The number of years spent boarding ranged from two to 11, with the average number of years at five point eight. In total, ten participants had at least one parent attend boarding school and 12 participants had siblings who also boarded. The majority attended a mixed sex boarding school. All participants boarded for at least some of the week but boarding status varied; some boarded full time including weekends, some were weekly boarders and some flexi-boarded where several nights were spent at school and the rest at home. The data showed that six participants reported that they had received psychological support previously, such as counselling or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

The average length of interviews was 63 minutes. The shortest interview lasted 43 minutes and the longest was 99 minutes. All of the interviews were conducted via Zoom due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions.

4.1.3 Reflective Notes

I kept a reflective diary to note the feelings and observations I experienced during each interview.

A key observation I made from the majority of participants was a sense of uncertainty when being asked what loneliness feels like to them. There was often a long pause and comments that the question was hard to answer. Participants would often need prompts. Several people would tentatively give a response and then ask me "..is that what you are looking for..?" I reflected that this could be because loneliness is a difficult experience to define. Perhaps participants felt uncomfortable sitting with a question to which there was no

definitive answer. I also questioned whether some participants were unfamiliar with talking about feelings, as responses were often short and given with uncertainty. Responses from those who had received some form of psychological intervention in the past were given much quicker and were elaborated on. However, there was a slight sense of shame and embarrassment from some respondents. This discomfort with describing loneliness seemed to be heightened in male respondents, who had a propensity to start talking about other students they had observed to be lonely and would often deflect questions about themselves. This happened despite all participants signing a consent form which stated that participation was reliant upon respondents having experienced loneliness at some point in their lives. I wondered if this reflected the stigma around discussing loneliness. I also questioned if this reticence indicated a 'stiff upper lip' ethos learnt at boarding school, where feelings were rarely addressed and which was making them difficult to address now.

A further observation I made was how, at times, the use of language seemed to prevent specific information being disclosed. For example, "rough and tumble" and "all a bit of fun" were phrases used to describe incidences of bullying. However when probed, participants seemed unwilling to provide any detailed description about what these behaviours were exactly. Some answers could be vague and somewhat mysterious. It made me question whether some participants sat with secrets from boarding school that they felt could never be revealed. This felt frustrating for me at times, as I felt that I was being kept at a distance from relevant and meaningful information.

Throughout the interview process I constantly reflected on the impact of COVID-19 upon the responses being given. I questioned if feelings were harder to identify and discuss as the interviews took place on Zoom, which meant there was no felt sense of shared safety, which is sometimes more easily experienced during face to face interviews. Conversely, some participants may have experienced the online forum a more comfortable, less exposing,

medium through which to communicate. I recognised, that as a Trainee Clinical Psychologist who has worked extensively online, I am familiar with talking about sensitive topics via video call. However, this was not the case for the majority of participants. I wondered if the social isolation that was being experienced nationwide at the time of the interviews meant that some participants wanted to talk to me for longer. During some of the interviews, I sensed a feeling of relief from participants that I was someone new who was available to talk to. I also questioned how the loneliness experienced during COVID-19 was impacting answers. In some interviews, it felt as though details of loneliness were easy to retrieve and describe, for those who were currently experiencing one of the loneliest times of their life.

4.1.4 Themes

Overall, five main themes and 13 sub-themes were found (see Table 5).

Table 5

Main Themes and Sub-Themes

Main Themes	Sub-themes
Perspectives on Loneliness	Being Alone Versus Feeling Alone
	The Felt Sense of Loneliness
How We Learned to Hide Our Vulnerability	Lining Up to Get Some Stick
	"Just Crack On!"
	The Long Shadow of Boarding School Grit
Navigating Loneliness as Ex-Boarders	Lonely Leaving Boarding School
	Lonely Leaving University
	Lonely Now
Avoidance and Resilience; Two Sides of the Same Coin	Coping With Loneliness at Boarding School
	How Adult Ex-Boarders Cope with Loneliness
Bonds Both Protect and Predispose Loneliness	The Odd One Out
	Tough Love
	Family Matters

1.1.40. Theme One: Perspectives on Loneliness

Overall, participants did not give a unified definition of loneliness and tended to navigate and explore different ways of thinking about loneliness. This included feeling lonely in terms of being alone versus feeling alone. Some participants related their meaning of loneliness to experiences at school, which implied that what felt familiar at school has determined how they have reacted to new contexts in later life.

4.1.4.1 Being Alone Versus Feeling Alone.

Some participants stated that they only feel lonely when they lack the physical presence of others. They explained that they do not feel lonely in any context, other than when they are physically alone.

"I think I only feel loneliness if I'm not actually physically with another person, like I don't tend to feel lonely if I've got other people around me" (pp 12, age 28)

Several participants connected this form of loneliness to constantly being around people at boarding school and immediately made links to their time at boarding school when considering their answer.

"I would say that boarding school is the reason why I probably feel loneliness as being a physical presence, because you're never on your own at boarding school so when I am on my own, I'm like erm what?!" (pp 9, age 29)

The majority of participants expressed that they feel that loneliness consists of more than just lacking the physical presence of others. Many were able to link feeling lonely to lacking an emotional connection to other people. There was consensus that it was possible to feel lonely when surrounded by others.

"I can still feel lonely if I'm around loads of people; it's not always about the bodily contact, it's feeling the emotional connection, I think" (pp 11, age 27)

A number of people linked experiencing loneliness in this way to always being around people at boarding school but not necessarily feeling any emotional connection to their peers.

"...feeling lonely but, even when I'm surrounded by loads of people - maybe that's from boarding school because you're always around people so even if you do feel lonely there's still going to be people there. I don't think being around loads of people in boarding school eliminates loneliness from your life if you know what I mean. So maybe I still have that in social situations" (pp11, age 27)

Feeling unsupported and alone with a problem was a further common situation linked with experiences of loneliness in adulthood.

"...not necessarily a physical experience, more of an internal experience... so you can be around a lot of people and feel lonely. There's that component... so that feeling of disconnect maybe from other people and that feeling of self... you really have yourself to rely on. You don't have an external support system" (pp 12, age 28)

Most participants acknowledged that loneliness is a complex and subjective state that is experienced differently for different people. Some seemed to find it hard to explain what loneliness means to them, taking their time to respond when asked and often acknowledging that it is a difficult experience to describe. There was a sense that participants were thinking back to times when they have felt lonely when considering what loneliness means to them.

4.1.4.2 The Felt Sense of Loneliness

There was considerable variation in how participants described loneliness feels to them. A number of different adjectives were used; the words ‘sad’ and ‘anxious’ were the most frequently given. Some participants were able to offer a felt sense of loneliness very quickly, with little hesitation. However, others seemed to find it more difficult to access descriptive words to summarise how loneliness feels to them.

“Loneliness to me is feeling sad” (pp 11, age 27)

“So, I would yeah definitely say a bit of anxiety” (pp 4, age 22)

Some, but not all, participants linked feeling lonely to a particular part of their body, often their stomach.

“I would say in my tummy and things... feels a bit like your stomach is churning. I don’t know, sometimes it feels cold like you want to wrap up in a duvet just feel a bit down, and low and your tummy feels a bit shaky” (pp 8, age 28)

All participants described a difference between feeling lonely and feeling homesick; homesickness was often linked to a specific desire to be at home, surrounded by ‘home comforts’ and family members. Many acknowledged that the terms loneliness and homesickness are used interchangeably but mean different things.

"I would think that homesickness was that urge to want to go home and like see your parents and have all, like your home comforts, whereas loneliness I'd put down to like, yeah, feeling isolated" (pp 16, age 27)

The majority of participants voiced a strong dislike of being alone. Only three out of 18, recognised that they enjoyed solitude and feel totally comfortable in their own company.

This theme suggests that loneliness is not only experienced in different contexts, but it feels different psychologically and physiologically too. Descriptions of loneliness seemed to be intricately bound up with past experiences of loneliness, which may be why some participants referenced times at boarding school when considering their response, and others did not.

1.1.41. Theme Two: How We Learned to Hide Our Vulnerability

This theme addresses how loneliness was hardly acknowledged at boarding school and was often stigmatised. Admitting loneliness could often result in being bullied. For some, acknowledging loneliness in adulthood is difficult due to an ethos of "just crack on in the face of difficulty" that was instilled in boarding school and persists now. Several participants explained that they find it hard to ask for help in difficult situations as an adult, which can perpetuate loneliness further.

4.1.4.3 Lining Up to Get Some Stick

Almost all participants reflected that loneliness was not often acknowledged at boarding school due to the stigma attached. Many participants commented that admitting to loneliness was seen as a weakness which was often followed by teasing and bullying; some gave examples of students who were known as the 'homesick ones'.

Participants gave examples of times when they were lonely but felt unable to tell anyone, including their parents, friends, or school staff. Several participants linked this to not wanting to seem ungrateful to their parents as they were aware that their parents were paying for their education.

"I remember... if it would be the weekend and if I wasn't going to a friend's house and you know... if there was just a few Chinese or Asians at school who would sort of like stick together... I remember feeling really upset that I was there and not at a school, say nearer home, where I could go home, there was no one to hang out with, and being really upset about that and not actually... just not saying anything to anyone, I didn't know who to say something to because I guess the person you would naturally speak to should be your parents but I didn't want to come across ungrateful so I just wouldn't say anything". (pp 10, age 29)

It was apparent that participants felt that there was a shame culture surrounding admitting to being lonely in boarding school. There was consensus that it could impact what other students thought about you.

"I think it would be a shame thing. I think there's a pride in popularity at school like not ever looking like you didn't have someone to hang out with." (pp 12, age 28)

"There is a tacit but extremely powerful culture, I think, that discourages expressing emotion, ermm, and then there's a family culture in that as well… of… you know… oh, 'even if you feel that way, you know, don't make too much of a big deal of it' or, you know, 'focus on things that you can do that you can enjoy'" (pp 6, age 27)

Many people linked their hesitance to discussing feeling lonely to a fear of getting bullied.

"People would be reluctant to open up like that because you might get some stick. That's the truth - especially if, you're like 13/14 years old and said, 'I miss my mum and dad' – you are lined up to get some stick" (pp 3, age 29)

However, some people described feeling able to address loneliness with family and friends and reported that this was a positive experience. Participants with supportive friendship groups at boarding school often reflected that they felt lucky to have people with whom they could talk when they were feeling lonely or homesick.

"I did speak to my parents when I was having a bad day - having an outside voice who's not there… it did help" (pp 4, age 22)

"I was never bullied for being homesick, everyone was really caring – I think I was really embarrassed by it, even though no one made me feel that way. And there was also another girl in my year, in my boarding house, who had it really badly as well, so I think that kind of helped me to not feel super alone because it wasn't just me." (pp 11, age 27)

There was consensus between all participants that the person with whom you shared your boarding house, and therefore was most readily available to befriend, was down to chance. That seemed to play a large part in determining experiences of and discussing loneliness.

"I think it's a lottery, a big part of it is a lottery… who you end up spending your time with and who happens to be in your boarding house and 'do you get on?'... and I think I didn't win that lottery, ermm, unfortunately hence I spent a lot of my time alone" (pp 6, age 27)

Several participants discussed how they felt experiencing loneliness was not a problem that was significant enough to share with their peers. Some spoke about the difficult and complicated home environments that their friends and peers came from. For example, some described friends who had lost a parent to illness; others whose parents lived abroad or had remarried and had developed new families. Loneliness was therefore described as a 'minor issue' in comparison to other problems that boarding students were dealing with.

"13 [years old] upwards definitely would say I was a bit more open with my feelings to friends and stuff on how I was feeling, but I think there's also an element where you don't want to share that you're just lonely. It almost has to be a bigger problem for you to then say 'actually, this is why I'm sad... I'm not just sad because I'm sad I'm sad because of X, Y and Z', so I think there's definitely like a, like a public perception that you shouldn't always be sad just because you're lonely." (pp 16, age 27)

"I think that I knew I was so lucky with my family – probably good for me in that I saw how dysfunctional some people's families were and how lucky I was to have two loving parents who were still together and picked me up every Friday and picked up friends and looked after everyone. I don't think I talked about homesickness to them as what was going on in their personal lives was so much tougher." (pp 8, age 28)

This theme highlights how addressing loneliness at boarding school felt difficult for the majority and may consequently feel difficult now.

4.1.4.4 "Just Crack On!"

Some participants discussed that as an adult they use a "just crack on" approach when faced with a distressing situation, instead of acknowledging that they are struggling. They could link this to their boarding school ethos of "just crack on", which seemed to be underpinning current avoidant approaches to managing distress. One participant spoke about her response to feeling lonely after the breakdown of a serious relationship in her early 20's.

"I think, my reaction is... get on with things, keep, keep going... that's probably the attitude of my schooling and my family philosophy I would say" (pp 18, age 28)

Several participants described a 'tough shield' that they were encouraged to adopt at boarding school, which served to detach them from their emotions. Some made links between this shield and feeling lonely now, in adulthood, as they feel that they are not attached to their feelings.

"It's that kind of toughness and which I think is quite a good skill to have in some ways, but when it comes to deep emotions or being a grown-up... being an adult... and it's all a toughness from the outside, or it's a confidence of knowing how to, you know, hold yourself and talk and… you know, be all you know "oh all is good" but inside you don't really... you're not that attached to your feelings and that I think feels very, very lonely" (pp 17, age 31)

There was a sense from some participants that this emotional detachment is something they are now trying to reverse in adulthood, for example through therapy. Several

participants explained that they are currently using their therapy space to address the emotional suppression they experienced at boarding school. The "just crack on" ethos used at boarding school seemed to result in individuals pretending to be ok at school; some participants explained that they can still adopt this tough persona now, as an adult.

"So I'm doing counselling at the moment because a lot of things have been happening recently in terms of my family and um, I guess, I felt like I need to be more of a rock and be confident and... and that's made me feel very lonely because I'm like... it's that whole shield again of like you know that you can go 'no, no, no', because 'it will be fine' and pretend that everything's fine. And crack on and um and I actually think that everything's fine like, be like 'Well, I can do this' slightly you know the chip on shoulder thing of like 'No, no well you know it's life, shit happens, get on with it' which is a very, I felt, quite a boarding school thing" (pp 13, age 29)

This subtheme gives insight into why acknowledging loneliness as an adult might be difficult for ex-boarders. For some, the ethos that they were taught to live by at school seems to still be applied in life now as an adult. Stoic language was used by many, with expressions such as "stiff upper lip" and "just crack on" used repeatedly.

4.1.4.5 The Long Shadow of Boarding School Grit

Participants discussed how they can find it hard to reach out for support in times of loneliness and distress as an adult, which often results in them handling a difficult situation on their own. Some, but not all, linked this to times when they felt upset at boarding school and were unable to be supported by their parents as they were so far away.

"I'm not the kind of friend that will call you crying on the phone if I've had a bad day. That's just not my thing… if we come back to the whole boarding school thing, if I did that at boarding school, called my parents crying, they can't do anything because they're not there" (pp 16, age 27)

"I would have just put on like... just hidden the vulnerable parts of myself... 100% that's what I did - so that's what the cracking of it [boarding school] was like; toughen up and everyone's going to… no one is going to hold you when you cry here so either hold yourself or don't cry and that's still my M.O [Modus Operandi] now" (pp 17, age 31)

"You do not... you do not have, you can't have... you can't have needs because there's no one there, so you cannot have needs, and I find that now I'm... I'm very resistant to ask for anything from anyone, in case they don't give it" (pp 17, age 31)

There seems to be a strong sense of a need to be independent in the face of difficulty, both at boarding school and now as an adult. One participant explained her independent approach to coping with loneliness as an adult when her partner works abroad.

"I just kind of put a brave face on and just kind of get on with it" (pp 16, age 27)

"It's only really when I'm with people and they ask me how I am and they think it's a conversation point and actually often I don't want to talk about it… it kind of 'is what it is' and, yeah, I just have to crack on" (pp 16, age 27)

Conversely, another participant described coping with loneliness when working away from home by talking to colleagues about how he was feeling.

"[I would]... talk to my friends on the submarine which was also great. And the best thing about that was, of course, that they were all feeling the same as me, or at least we all, I think, yeah, we did actually acknowledge it. Interestingly, we did, we did. You know, it's not a kind of stiff upper lip, kind of, "let's get on with it". We're all grown men here. We all recognize that we were missing home" (pp 1, age 31)

This subtheme suggests a vicious cycle of loneliness may be at play for some, but not all, ex-boarders, where their experiences in boarding school may make talking about loneliness in adulthood difficult. This may be perpetuating a further sense of loneliness as attempts are made to manage loneliness independently.

1.1.42. Theme Three: Navigating Loneliness as Adult Ex-boarders

This theme summarises the experience of leaving boarding school. Many participants commented on the shock of leaving boarding school and some initially experienced loneliness at university. Those who attended university after boarding school explained how similar the two environments were. Therefore, some felt lonely leaving university. Almost all participants experience loneliness in adulthood and some made links between these experiences and times at boarding school.

4.1.4.6 Lonely Leaving Boarding School

Several people explained that they felt lonely immediately after leaving boarding school, where they had to adjust to being in a new environment outside of the boarding

school home. All participants, whether they reported enjoying or disliking boarding school, commented on the transition period. The majority of participants attended university after boarding school. Whilst many people described the transition to university as 'easy' as it felt like a continuation of school, some found the transition more challenging.

"I remember my parents dropping me off and I wasn't like in halls, I was in housing and my parents dropped me off and I like chased them down the road and like crying, 'Don't leave me.' (laughs) That transition was hard. I was in a really like very comfortable, secure state in school erm…and walking away from that was very scary" (pp 12, age 28)

"I felt like my whole support network had like gone, like almost overnight. It was a really weird adjustment again, that's probably because I had such a positive experience. Yeah, it was really hard" (pp 16, age 27)

For some, boarding school removed them from a challenging home environment and provided security and friendship. Even those who described having a challenging time socially at boarding school commented on how the constant structure provided a sense of comfort.

"For me, home was a much less sociable place than school, so I probably felt liable to loneliness a lot more having left school" (pp 6, age 27)

Several participants described teachers being parental figures, which made boarding school hard to leave.

"At my leavers dinner I was so emotional because they were like my family by the end of it, my friends were like siblings but then like the teachers were like all parental, in a way, you know, the holistic care was like unbelievable. You know, people always there and like leaving them felt like leaving because I knew I was never going to be like in touch with them. As, you know, in the way I was back then. I knew I was losing them, you know, so yeah, I was like, so emotional" (pp 2, age 31)

Close attachments to friends and teachers meant that leaving boarding school felt like a lonely time for some.

Several ex-boarders explained the sense of panic they felt after leaving boarding school and experiencing loneliness for the first time. There was a strong sense from these participants that loneliness is a state that should be avoided.

"I think it's probably actually very important to me that I don't feel it because it properly freaks me out." (pp 9, age 29)

4.1.4.7 Lonely Leaving University

There was consensus that university was similar to boarding school; many people described university as a 'continuation of boarding school' where they lived with friends and were constantly surrounded by people. There was a shared sense that university had kept them institutionalised. Consequently, participants explained that it was a shock to be alone for the first time in their lives after university ended. One participant described moving alone to a new city to study for a master's degree after leaving university.

"I think it's because, in all seriousness, all my life up until that point, I had been continuously around people; so, from being at home, then junior school [living with] with my family, then I was at boarding school, which is continuously with people, then I went to university and I was living in close quarters with friends and then suddenly from that going to a place where I didn't know anyone and I didn't quickly form relationships with people, yeah I'd never felt I, to be honest I'd never felt lonely prior to that". (pp 10, age 29)

However, some people discussed how the relationships they formed at boarding school enabled them to see that they were able to create strong relationships with non-family members. This has helped them to form relationships throughout adulthood, which have protected them from loneliness. One participant described how that helped her move abroad after university.

"The relationships I formed I'm SO grateful for, and I think because we were all at boarding school together it's created those friendships and I think yes, it means that my boundaries are definitely limited – skewed – and it probably sets the mark really high for my friendships now, but it has also taught me like what that bond can feel like and that you can have it with people that aren't your family and I think in a way that's enabled me to travel and live here [Australia] and do all this stuff and not feel lonely during covid when I haven't seen my family for 18 months is because I have learned that if you can bond like that with people with people you don't – who aren't cut from the same cloth in that sense." (pp 12, age 28)

For some, it seems that attending boarding school has instilled a strong sense of independence in adult years which has provided a form of resilience to loneliness. Several respondents described themselves as having a "resilience" or "tolerance" to loneliness.

4.1.4.8 Lonely Now

Almost all participants explained that they experience loneliness in adulthood. Some made links between current experiences and experiences at boarding school. Several drew comparisons between experiences of social isolation during boarding school and the behaviours they used during that time, to experiences of isolation in adult years where the same behaviours have continued. One participant described experiencing bullying during boarding school which led to him frequently staying inside his bedroom alone. He comments that he continues to isolate himself now, in his adult years.

"I think it links on to why I isolate myself still – I brought it upon myself – I used to sit in my room alone when I was at boarding school – I think it just carried on as such and then never changed so I think it was brought across with me from boarding school. Some bits were good (for learning) but some things have hindered me in certain places, like friendship groups" (pp 4, age 22)

"I would go downstairs as they would keep calling me the same name so it would piss me off – so I would exclude myself even more – I think that's why I'm more excluded now because of all that stuff – maybe that's why I am a bit more lonely [now] from it" (pp 4, age 22)

Similarly, another participant commented on the long-lasting ways in which boarding school has impacted his self-image and how he relates to other people.

"I think there's ways of perceiving myself and where I fit in with other people, or not, would be a big one, erm, yeah, like going back to the kind of the cool kids, 'The Posse'.. thinking that I don't fit in with them or that I'm not any, yeah, not, not fun or sociable, err, yeah I

guess that can put me under certain... yeah, it creates a self-image, perhaps, and, not that boarding school is entirely responsible for that, but definitely a decent part of it." (pp 6, age 27)

For some, experiences of loneliness in adulthood feel similar to how they did at boarding school and can be linked to specific times of the day and parts of the body.

"I do think there's something, probably in the bed at night-time feeling lonely [experienced now] that did come from boarding school... I didn't think that before, but maybe from this there's... I think there's a connection with night-time and feeling lonely [now] from being in that first-year boarding school, maybe." (pp 11, age 27)

One participant linked a recent break up of a relationship to the homesickness she experienced in boarding school and how this feels physically in her heart.

"Like, well, my heart break last summer, I was, I mean I thought I thought I would die, and it was very disarming to have this experience as a 30-year-old woman. Just full stop; the experience of that was so shocking physically in my heart and it reminded me of being homesick at school, and it was like my soul being pulled apart from source... like, I know I'm being dramatic, but it was, that's what it felt like being homesick." (pp 17, age 31)

One participant described a sense of loneliness in adult years and a recognition that she is now working herself out after the 'act' she felt she was playing at boarding school, which she feels is related to her current loneliness.

"I felt once you go into the big world, only now really, pretty much only in my late 20s, do I feel a bit lonely because I'm trying to figure out who I am" (pp 13, age 29)

"*I feel it's a whole acting role… like I did have a good experience of being at boarding school, but I think you learn to become a little bit… like you know, this sort of shell, and then what's underneath your real self is sometimes… you never get out of the shell because you're like, "this is my protective shell", I've got all my friends who'd had the same experience, it doesn't have to be boarding school, it could be any like group but.. I don't like that, I don't, I don't want to be part of that… it makes me feel lonely" (pp 13, age 29)*

"You know, there was that whole like feeling very... I think quite lonely before I went to boarding school then going to boarding school and finding this new kind of character to be... yeah boarding schools do do that, that they help give you so much confidence and be a certain kind of way, and then you leave school and you go to the real world where it's not like everyone's been formed that way - everyone's got their different ways of growing up. And… and… you've got to find your whole balance again and that's when the loneliness I think sometimes comes in, because you are like. "Who do I really want to be? What snippets of me do I want to make me and as an adult which I'm only discovering?" (pp 13, age 29)

This subtheme indicates how experiences of loneliness at boarding school can influence feelings and behaviours that can last into adulthood and can continue to perpetuate loneliness.

1.1.43. Theme Four: Avoidance and Resilience; Two Sides of the Same Coin

It is clear that for the majority of ex-boarders in the sample, acknowledging and addressing loneliness was hard at boarding school and continues to feel difficult now in adulthood. Few direct comparisons were made between coping mechanisms used to combat loneliness in boarding school compared to adulthood by participants. However, similarities were apparent in the discussion, and it was clear that for many ex-boarders, the same coping techniques for loneliness were still being used in adulthood. It seems that some participants avoid loneliness at both boarding school and in adulthood by filling out their time with activities. Others report coping with loneliness by seeking out activities and people which has led to resilience in the face of loneliness.

4.1.4.9 Coping with Loneliness at Boarding School

Almost all participants commented on how the number of activities built into their week at boarding school 'blocked' loneliness out.

"They kept us so occupied doing stuff all the time, you're never really given a second to think about it, there was so much routine, and structure and it was probably the best thing for everybody you just don't have that, you never had that down time" (pp 16, age 27)

Conversely, one participant commented that this busy schedule could serve to amplify feelings of loneliness.

"Yeah, you can feel lonely because there's so much going on that if you're not involved, there is actually a wonder as to why, because there's so much you can be involved with" (pp 5, age 31)

Writing a diary, reading and listening to music were self-initiated activities that participants stated they used to cope with loneliness. Whilst the majority explained that they would not tell their friends that they were feeling lonely, many spoke of the benefits of having friends when they were feeling lonely. Several participants explained that they were full-time boarders because their parents lived far away and all their friends would go home at the weekend, leaving them alone and feeling lonely at school. To cope with this, they would often spend the weekend at their friends' houses, describing themselves as the 'adopted child'.

"I just make some really good friends with a few people and just go I guess and jump into that family home for the weekend" (pp 18, age 28)

There was variation in the amount of contact that the ex-boarders were allowed with their family when they were at school; some reported having their phones taken off them in the evening by school staff which made calling and texting family members hard. Many participants discussed reaching out to family members when they were lonely at boarding school. A few also explained that they would reach out to older students and university staff.

4.1.4.10 How Adult Ex-Boarders Cope With Loneliness

The majority of participants discussed coping with loneliness through involvement in activities and hobbies. These include sports, choir, painting, parties, watching TV, throwing themselves into work and walking. Some commented that this helps distract them from the feeling of being lonely. One participant described how he coped when he was feeling lonely working in a new country as a member of the army.

"I volunteered to get sent away on everything I could with the army and ended up going on lots of fun experiences which kind of distracted from what's going on" (pp 2, age 31)

A number of participants described themselves as being 'action focussed' and used language that suggested that loneliness is not an emotion that should be tolerated or addressed; instead it is something that needs to be 'fixed'.

"You want to like make sure that you've got something planned... I'm definitely one of those ones that has like to have control over my feelings, so if something like that happens I'm very quick to be like 'right okay what am I gonna do about it?' and kind of fix it I guess" (pp 14, age 29)

One participant linked this action focussed approach to dealing with loneliness in adulthood to life at boarding school, where constant activities meant that there was no time to acknowledge feelings.

"So what I do to combat loneliness is to book myself up weeks in advance with parties and sports and other activities. I talk to my friends, and I just kept really busy, I play hockey I play netball, I'm in a choir, basically I just get myself so busy, kind of like what I was like in school where - if we are like drawing connections like - I made it where I had no time to just sit and relax. You know, I'm not very good with my own thoughts" (pp 7, age 29)

Almost all participants said that meeting up with friends helps when they are feeling lonely, if this is possible. This coping strategy was described even by participants who commented that being lonely was more than just being physically alone. Some said that

meeting people is the *only* way they cope with loneliness. One participant explained that arranging to meet up with her boyfriend at the weekends was the only way she coped with feeling lonely when she moved to a new city alone to study for a master's degree.

"That was the only thing that got me through because I knew that I knew that in two weeks, I was going to have time away from this place or have someone that I love in in a place with me kind of thing" (pp 10, age 29)

Several participants discussed how they are never lonely in adulthood as they keep themselves busy and surrounded by people, which prevents loneliness. This suggests that loneliness is something that feels in their control and can be prevented by activities and occupation.

"There are very few times I am lonely as I am very good at organizing myself and being around people" (pp 7, age 29)

"I guess I'll never feel that I'm lonely because I'm always doing something it's not like... I'm not the kind of person who will sit in my room playing PlayStation, as a young adult – that just wasn't my thing - I'd always keep myself occupied - so I've just never been that way." (pp 3, age 29)

The main reason respondents gave for their fear of being lonely is being alone with their thoughts. However, no participants explained why they feared this.

"I guess everyone sort of knows that I'm busy, I like to keep busy, so I didn't really find myself in a situation ever where I was sort of too much in my own head" (pp 18, age 28)

Few participants said that they would explicitly tell other people that they are feeling lonely, when experiencing loneliness. However, several participants explained that calling friends often helps with loneliness.

"I'm the kind of person where if I do feel lonely, I will message a friend and be like, can I see you?' In coronavirus times I was messaging a friend like please can you come down and see me?" (pp 7, age 29)

This theme shows how avoiding loneliness and building a sense of resilience to loneliness through coping, can be seen as two sides of the same coin. Some ex-boarders cope with loneliness by doing things and seeing people. Others do not allow themselves to ever experience loneliness as they create a life where they are never alone, so lonely thoughts and feelings are avoided.

1.1.44. Theme Five: Bonds Both Protect and Predispose Loneliness

For some ex-boarders, loneliness was first experienced in early childhood years within the family setting, where there was a perceived sense of feeling different from others. This feeling continued into boarding school and adulthood in some instances. Some participants describe the 'tough love' approach taken by their parents, which made addressing emotions with them difficult. However, it was felt by many that the family bond can protect against loneliness.

4.1.4.11 The Odd One Out

Several participants explained that they felt lonely as child, in the years before attending boarding school. Some gave examples of feeling lonely temporarily as a child when they were away from their parents for the first time, for example at a sleepover. Others described a more pervasive sense of loneliness within the family setting. Various reasons were given for this, including being the minority gender within siblings and cousins which led to feeling left out, getting teased and bullied by siblings, parents re-marrying partners they did not get along with or having parents living in different countries from one another.

"I suppose, maybe I felt sometimes left out as a child. As a sibling because my sister, my other… my other sister and my brother, they got on better than I did and they would like... just leave me and they'd be really mean to me and call me stupid." (pp 2, age 31)

Five participants (pp 17, pp 28, pp 6, pp 4, pp 2) explained that they have always felt lonely in the family setting as a child or teenager and this is because they feel different from their family. All of these participants explained that they also continue to feel lonely within the family setting, now as adults.

"In my family… I've always felt quite lonely in my family because I... I don't know just the way I talk about stuff is different to them and they're all quite closed [off] and, and, and strong fronted, I guess, and I, that's not my natural way and I want to talk about stuff and I also feel loads of stuff and want to communicate that but I guess really young it was… I understood that that wasn't the way we do it so I've always felt quite unseen in my family in lots of ways and although I'm really, I'm so close with them all, but… so I guess I've maybe, but then I will, I also felt… feel very loved by them all, so I feel very loved but it's a bit

confusing when the people you feel most loved by, you also don't feel truly… truly seen by" (pp 17, age 31)

Some of these participants continued to experience loneliness at boarding school and some also feel lonely more generally in life now, as adults. However, no one stated that their relationship with their parents changed as a result of attending boarding school.

"I feel different to all my family members because they are more like – they get things done – they get things done, but everyone else has done so much more than me. I feel like I'm just this odd one out. I could define that as loneliness in a way. Whereas, like everyone else has exceeded at work and stuff and I'm just here, still, I haven't progressed so it's a bit of a weird one I say." (pp 4, age 22)

Some participants attributed their experiences at or after boarding school to aspects of the family context pre-boarding school.

4.1.4.12 Tough Love

Three participants discussed how emotions, including loneliness, were not addressed by their parents. All three experienced loneliness at some point during boarding school and they explained that they found this hard to raise with their parents. They discussed how they received and continue to receive 'tough love' from their parents.

"I think I'm very close with my family, but in a fun silly jokey sort of way. Like we would never really ask how you feel necessarily it would just basically be like 'oh, if you're upset okay let's do something to make you happy' and I think we just don't really talk about feelings very much" (pp 18, age 28)

Two participants commented that they do not have very traditionally 'motherly mothers' and both commented that they had at least one parent who had attended boarding school themselves. They made links between this tough love approach and their parents' boarding school experiences.

"We're having all sorts of fun at the moment, trying to work out how our relationship goes forwards and it's hard because… she can't do this stuff and she'll just say "I'm fine darling, I'm fine, I'm fine, I went to boarding school but I'm fine !", so that's how she parents me." (pp 17, age 31)

An additional participant commented that he feels his parents provided for him and his siblings in a financial sense; however not in an emotional sense.

"I think, being in a big family, and having a lot of space and people doing different things did create a kind of vacuum feeling to some extent, so I think I felt quite distant a lot of the time and not like there was a real connection on an emotional level and I think, growing up, Mum and Dad quite, like, 'provided' more than... taking care of our emotional needs, erm. Yeah, I think that's fair, there again, I wouldn't have named it that way until recently" (pp 6, age 27)

There was a sense that this emotional disconnect from parents had been confusing at times and may have made discussing emotions with anyone hard for participants throughout life.

4.1.4.13 Family Matters

The majority of participants described having close relationships with their parents and family before going to boarding school. Many people spoke of missing their parents at boarding school. No participants commented on the bond with their parents changing during boarding school.

Some participants discussed that having an older sibling at boarding school with them protected them from loneliness as they could seek them out for support when they were feeling low and felt better protected against bullies. The age gap between siblings was not recorded.

"I remember seeing them and my heart kind of leapt just a little bit, because they were a familiar face and a friendly face there, in a place where, at the time, felt big and scary a lot of the time… so I think it helps to know they were there" (pp 6, age 27)

"I was so excited for boarding school.. first year I was really, really lonely, but I still had my sister in my boarding house so that really helped" (pp 11, age 27)

Some participants also discussed how they rarely saw their sibling/s as they were a different age or gender which meant that they were kept apart at school as they were in a different year group or boarding house. This meant that they spent both their academic and free time in different parts of the school.

One participant commented that he feels that his close relationship with his family serves to protect him from feeling lonely, as he knows his family are always there to support him should he need them

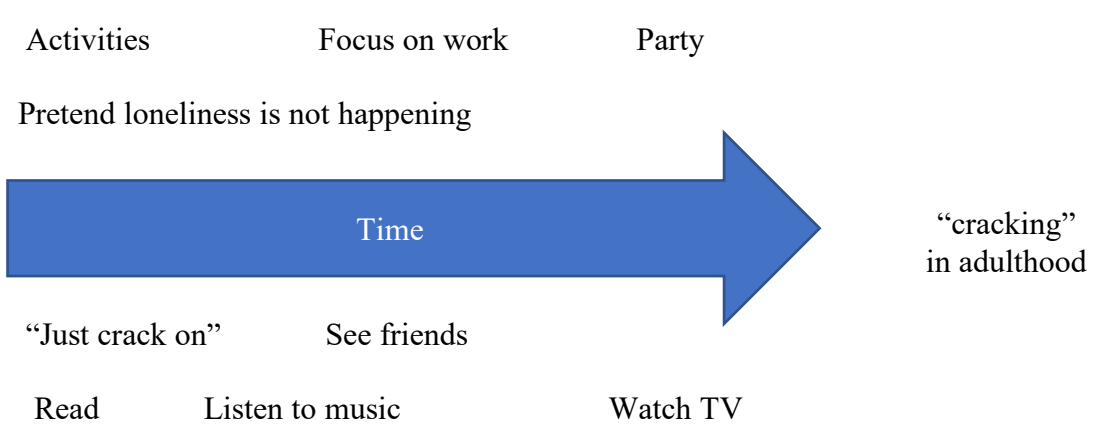
"No matter what happens my family are right there and any one of them would take me in and feed me, yeah so well that's not always on my mind I don't need that like literally in the back of my mind, as I go out at night, but I guess that gives you an element of security in life" (pp 5, age 31)

It seems that having a close bond to the family served to buffer loneliness for some at boarding school and can continue to protect against loneliness now in adulthood.

Summary of Results

Boarding school students may be vulnerable to experiencing loneliness, due to separation from parents, exposure to bullying and victimisation and an unwillingness to acknowledge difficult feelings. The stigma surrounding loneliness may make addressing loneliness during boarding school hard. Avoidant coping techniques that develop during boarding school may perpetuate into adulthood. This may mean that adult ex-boarders experience loneliness but find it difficult to identify, discuss or address. For some, this could act as an adaptive coping strategy that results in loneliness being effectively ignored. For others, this could be a distressing and isolating experience. This coping mechanism may eventually crack and result in a heightened sense of loneliness and uncertainty surrounding who the 'true self' is. This is summarised in the figure below.

Figure 3
Avoidance and adaptive coping used across time



5.1.1 Chapter Summary

The following chapter will summarise the research findings. Each of the themes will be presented, discussed and considered in line with psychological theories. The strengths and limitations of the study will then be reflected upon and future recommendations for research will be made. Finally, a reflexive account from the author will be presented and followed by a conclusion.

5.1.2 Perspectives on Loneliness

This theme incorporates ex-boarders' different perspectives of loneliness and includes two subthemes, 'Being Alone Versus Feeling Alone' and 'Experiencing Feeling Alone'.

Subtheme one, 'Being Alone Versus Feeling Alone' demonstrates how participants conceptualise loneliness in terms of both being alone versus feeling alone. For some, social isolation and the experience of being physically alone conceptualises loneliness in its entirety. This is in line with Killeen's (1988) definition of loneliness, which states that whether a person has *chosen* to be alone will determine if they view the experience as positive or negative. Ex-boarders who find themselves alone involuntarily experience loneliness as a negative state.

This differs from the majority of ex-boarders in the current study, who acknowledged that loneliness can be more than just being physically alone and that it is possible to feel lonely in the presence of others. Participants discussed how feeling lonely is related to a sense of disconnect from those around them. This highlights the human need for a sense of connection to others. At boarding school, control over who you choose to share your environment with is limited which may mean that the quality of social interactions is poor. De Jong Gierveld (1988) suggests that the quality of people's relationships can determine if they are satisfactory to meet need, and it is therefore people's perceptions of their interactions with others that determines loneliness. This may explain the internal experience of loneliness

for ex-boarders, who acknowledged that they spent time at school surrounded by people who they felt no connection to. At the time of boarding school, there may have been an isolating realisation that they have only themselves to rely on. Ex-boarders may recognise that this form of loneliness can persist into adulthood, especially as loneliness can be recurrent and chronic (Junttila et al., 2016).

De Jong's (1988) theory may explain why there is such variation in experiences of loneliness, as is evident in the sub-theme 'Experiencing Feeling Alone'. The range of adjectives given reflects the unique nature of the experience of loneliness to the individual. Loneliness was overwhelmingly considered to be a negative experience, with only a few positive accounts of solitude given. These accounts were given as secondary experiences and only if being physically alone was out of choice.

There was also variation in whether participants experienced loneliness as a physical feeling within the body. For some, loneliness was a purely psychological process. For others, psychosomatic experiences were a prominent aspect, where certain parts of the body were activated more than others. Perhaps this depended on whether or not loneliness was experienced at boarding school. Several participants seemed to be accessing memories of feeling lonely when answering questions about what loneliness feels like to them. For these individuals, experiences of loneliness may have been more intense and pervasive and therefore linked to bodily sensations as well as psychological processes.

It is important to acknowledge the context of COVID-19 when interpreting the results. All of the interviews took place during or after the COVID-19 lockdown. At this time, social contact was limited due to stay at home rules imposed by the government. This may have skewed how participants viewed loneliness and solitude. Almost all participants commented that COVID-19 had been a particularly lonely time for them. No participants made direct links or comparisons between experiencing loneliness whilst being 'locked

inside' during COVID-19 and that of loneliness or feeling locked-in during boarding school. However, feelings of entrapment and loneliness may have been unconsciously triggered which in turn, could have influenced interview responses.

5.1.3 How We Learned to Hide our Vulnerability

This main theme considers how loneliness was rarely acknowledged and addressed at boarding school. It incorporates three subthemes, including 'Lining Up to Get Some Stick', which discusses how loneliness was often stigmatised and that admitting loneliness could result in bullying. Subtheme two, 'Just Crack On' considers how acknowledging loneliness can feel difficult now, due to a philosophy of "just crack on in the face of difficulty" that was instilled in boarding school and persists into adulthood. Some participants commented that this was also an ethos encouraged at home by their parents, who had also attended boarding school. Subtheme three 'The Long Shadow of Boarding School Grit' summarises how some ex-boarders struggle to reach out and ask for support now and often manage loneliness independently. This can further perpetuate the loneliness.

In 'Lining Up to Get Some Stick' participants talk about a reluctance to discuss loneliness with their teachers and peers due to the stigma surrounding loneliness. This is unsurprising given the levels of stigma that surrounds loneliness (Brown, 2018). Fear of being bullied silenced students further. Many participants described the bullying they witnessed or experienced, in accord with previous research detailing the high prevalence (Lester et al., 2015) and lived experiences of bullying at boarding school. The reality of being unable to escape bullies was described by some. This avoidance of admitting loneliness may have prevented a common issue being discussed amongst peers, which could have alleviated distress. Sense of stigma may have been amplified in the boarding school environment, where social comparison is heightened. Research by Appel et al (2016) and Wang et al (2018)

highlights how social comparison through social media, where young people view posts of others socialising, can cause loneliness.

In the current study, social comparison seemed to impact experiences of loneliness in two ways. Firstly, ex-boarders explained that they did not want to be seen as lonely or friendless, for fear of being judged by their peers. This meant that experiences of loneliness were kept hidden. Secondly, comparison of the severity of the issues they were discussing could impact how loneliness was both addressed and managed. Some students reported that they did not feel that loneliness was an issue extreme enough to discuss, in comparison to some of the issues that their friends were discussing, such as divorced, unwell, or deceased parents. Participants described a reluctance to discuss missing home when some of their peers did not have a functional or safe home to go back to. This aligns with ideas by Peplau & Perlman (1982) who postulate that social reinforcement may underpin loneliness. Shame and stigma surrounding loneliness may prevent an individual from talking about loneliness. The positive impact of discussing the experience will therefore never be learnt or reinforced. Instead, individuals will remain silent, which may worsen loneliness.

'Just Crack On' highlights how a 'stiff upper lip' boarding school ethos of persevering in the face of difficulty has perpetuated into adulthood for many ex-boarders. This avoidant approach to managing distress at school has meant that for many, managing distress as an adult is difficult. Some participants described a 'tough shield' that has detached them from their emotions and sense of self, which can feel lonely. It seems that this shield has come close to cracking for some, who are now using therapy to help them explore their feelings. In their writings, Joy Schaverien (2011) and Nick Duffell (2000) discuss an "outward confidence, used to survive" developed by boarding school students, that may be masking internal insecurity. Evidence for an outward persona that does not match the inward experience was found in the current study.

In ‘The Long Shadow of Boarding School Grit’, the independent approach to managing distress is further emphasised by participants, who explain that they struggle to reach out for support when lonely. They referenced times at boarding school, when they felt they had no one to reach out to, to get their needs met. Asking for help as adults is reported to feel difficult and it seems there is a resistance to seeking support, which may trap ex-boarders in a vicious cycle of loneliness. Cognitive Behavioural Theory (e.g. see Beck, 1970) may explain this cycle. Feelings of loneliness may be followed by thoughts of needing to “persevere in the face of difficulty” and “just crack on” in order not to be viewed as weak by others. These thoughts may result in behaviours that further trap that individual with feelings of loneliness and isolation, for example, excessively focussing on work. Avoiding confronting the thoughts and feelings of loneliness may intensify the experience. However, it should be considered that not *all* participants reported difficulties in addressing loneliness at boarding school or in adulthood. Those who felt particularly lonely at boarding school may be more likely to become trapped in the cycle now, as adults.

5.1.4 Navigating Loneliness as Ex-Boarders

This main theme considers what leaving boarding school was like for participants. It contains three subthemes, each of which addresses the impact that attending boarding school had on periods of life after leaving boarding school. ‘Lonely Leaving Boarding School’ discusses the immediate transitional period. ‘Lonely Leaving University’ summarises how some feel that attending boarding school made leaving university more difficult. Finally, ‘Lonely Now’ considers the longer-term impacts that leaving boarding school has had on participants’ lives.

In ‘Lonely Leaving Boarding School’ it is clear that participants found the immediate transition into a non-boarding school reality difficult. Participants who reported to have a positive experience at boarding school explained how they struggled when leaving an

environment where they had formed so many close relationships. These participants described their school environment using words such as “comfortable” and “secure” and referred to staff and friends as family members. It is clear that strong attachments had formed for these students. This aligns with previous research that found strong attachments can form between boarding students and their teachers (Spina et al., 2019). In her publication, Schaverien (2011) discusses how being dropped off at boarding school by parents can be experienced as a trauma for some students, which can sever attachments between parent and child. It may be the case that teachers represented parent-like figures for students, who felt retraumatised by having to separate from yet another set of adults at the point of leaving boarding school. Several participants reported having challenging home lives, where parents had died, were unwell or had divorced. These individuals explained that they found leaving boarding school very difficult. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) emphasises the importance of the relationship with the early caregiver on later relationship formation. It stipulates that attachment style can change across the lifespan and can differ between each relationship. It may be the case that the individuals who came from challenging home environments finally found secure attachment figures in the staff at boarding school, who were seen as dependable. This could explain why leaving school felt so difficult for these individuals, who felt lonely without these figures in their life. They may have also been faced with returning to a home environment that felt more lonely than the one they were accustomed to at boarding school.

The experience of leaving boarding school may have been impacted by the age at which participants started and the number of years for which they attended. Several participants who reported finding leaving boarding school particularly difficult, started boarding at a younger age. This may be because they attended for more years and so had more time to form attachments to staff and students. However, it should also be noted that

several of the participants who started boarding at a younger age found the environment so difficult that they left and attended for fewer years compared to others.

The majority of participants attended university after leaving boarding school. In 'Lonely Leaving University' participants comment on how similar university felt to boarding school, in that they were living with friends within an institution. Consequently, leaving university and living outside of an institution for the first time in many years, felt difficult for some ex-boarders. Some participants commented that they formed friendships with people who had been to boarding school at university, so were kept inside a 'boarding school bubble'. Participants who went on to pursue independent endeavours post university, such as moving abroad or moving to a new city alone, reported feeling very lonely and outside of their comfort zone.

This could be explained by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978) which proposes that a person's sense of who they are can be determined by their group membership. It states that groups create a feeling of social identity and belonging. Groups can give a crucial sense of pride and self-esteem. This theory may apply to boarding school students, who view themselves as part of a group and institution for many years. They may then struggle when this sense of group membership is gone. As boarding school students are traditionally from upper-class families (Behaghel et al., 2017), exposure to other parts of society may feel unfamiliar and overwhelming, which could contribute to feelings of loneliness. It may be the case that boarding school provided a form of immunity to loneliness for some that continued into university and made post-university life difficult to adjust to.

In the theme, 'Lonely Now' conversations about transitioning away from a boarding-school life into later adulthood continue. Participants provided examples of times that they were lonely at boarding school and made connections between those times and current (or recent) experiences of loneliness now. One participant described the feeling in her heart

during a recent relationship break-up and compared this to feeling home sick at boarding school. The participant's breakup seemed to be emulating the feeling she had of abandonment at boarding school. Another participant explained how the bullying he incurred at boarding school led to isolating himself in his bedroom at school. He described how this behaviour has perpetuated into adulthood, where he continues to spend a lot of time in his bedroom at home. This suggests that both feelings of loneliness and behaviours that cause loneliness that started at boarding school can continue and be triggered later in life, causing loneliness to be experienced again. This may also link to the varied definitions of loneliness given by participants in theme one. Some participants related their definition of loneliness to experiences at school. They implied that what they became used to at boarding school, for example, not being alone but sometimes feeling alone, reveals how they would react to new contexts in life, i.e., feeling lonely in the presence of others again. Participants may unconsciously repeat familiar patterns, in line with psychodynamic ideas.

According to Erikson's stages of development (1993) participants might be denying themselves the opportunity to develop an identity in a social setting; the 'loner' identity becoming established instead. In line with cognitive behavioural ideas (e.g. see Beck, 1970) what was originally a successful survival strategy (isolating in the bedroom) becomes unhelpful behaviour perpetuating loneliness.

5.1.5 Avoidance and Resilience; Two Sides of the Same Coin

In this theme, coping mechanisms for loneliness used at both school and in adult life now, are discussed. The theme has two subthemes, 'Coping With Loneliness at Boarding School' and 'How Adult Ex-Boarders Cope With Loneliness'.

In both subthemes, participants describe activities that they use to cope with feeling lonely. These include sports, reading, listening to music and seeing friends. No participants explicitly stated that they use the same mechanisms that they used to cope with loneliness at

boarding school, now in adulthood. However, it was apparent that similarities existed. Whether activities were used to *cope* with loneliness or were used to *avoid* loneliness was not always clear. For example, some participants stated that the excessive use of activities meant that they rarely experienced loneliness as they never had time to sit with their thoughts. This seemed like more of an avoidance strategy than a coping strategy. It could be that this approach is used by some ex-boarders now, to distract from the previous trauma of being lonely at boarding school. Several participants said that they pack out their diaries with activities to prevent a situation where they are ever alone, as they experienced feeling lonely for the first time after leaving boarding school and never want to experience it again. A few participants reported that seeing friends is the *only* way that they can stop feeling lonely. This is despite them acknowledging that loneliness is more than just being alone. Perhaps boarding school fails to provide alternative skills or strategies to manage loneliness, so although feeling lonely is a feeling, not a physical state, it can only be addressed by changing the physical state of aloneness.

This avoidant coping strategy could also be conceptualised as 'resilience' as it seems adaptive for many participants, in that it serves to prevent the negative impacts of loneliness being experienced. However, it may be a coping mechanism that is time-limited and only effective in certain contexts. This may be why participants report feeling lonely when they have moved to a new environment on their own. It may also contribute to why some participants described a 'cracking' of a boarding school shield that was triggered by a certain event, such as a break-up or family emergency. This cracking is discussed by psychotherapists Schaverien (2011) and Duffell (2000) who have worked with ex-boarders who experienced a breaking point in adulthood. A few participants explained that they are now in therapy discussing elements of boarding school and sense of self now. It may be the

case that other participants reach this cracking point later in life and need to seek support to address the underlying causes that have contributed to their distress, including loneliness.

A number of participants referenced loneliness in relation to boredom. Several explained that there was “no time to feel lonely at boarding school” due to having a packed out diary, believing that loneliness was likely the result of boredom, both in childhood and in adulthood. Almost all participants explained that they had little time to be alone with their thoughts at boarding school and rarely felt bored. Research stresses the importance of boredom for both children and adults (Bench & Lench, 2013). It states that boredom can increase opportunities to attain social, cognitive, emotional and experiential stimulation that may otherwise not be experienced. Boarding school students may therefore lose out on the functional benefits of experiencing boredom, in that they have no time to seek alternative activities or company, as they are restricted to what is forced upon them in school. This may in turn, lead to a deficit in developing hobbies and relationships to which boarders feel a connection. This could result in loneliness.

5.1.6 Bonds Both Protect and Pre-dispose Loneliness

In this theme, the impact of the family bond on experiences of loneliness is considered. It explores the bond before, during and after boarding school. Some participants explained that they have always felt lonely in the family setting, including before attending boarding school. This is considered in subtheme one: ‘The Odd One Out’. In subtheme two, ‘Tough Love’, several participants explained that they feel the tough approach their parents took, where discussing feelings was often overlooked, meant that they experienced an emotional disconnect from them. The majority of subjects describe a close relationship with their parents, where they developed a close bond with them at an early age. This was unaffected by attending boarding school and remains close today. This is considered in ‘Family Matters’.

Pervasive and persistent loneliness within the family, “for as long as I can remember”, was reported by several participants. Some gave reasons that included sibling rivalry and their parents divorcing. Five participants explained that their sense of loneliness stems from feeling different from the rest of their family. This feeling started before boarding school, continued throughout and persists today. The phenomenon of family scapegoating has long been established, as is discussed by Vogel and Bell (1960). Many families scapegoat a family member to achieve a form of group unity. Adult ex-boarders may have experienced being the family scapegoat and identified themselves as the ‘odd one out’ in the family fold, before attending boarding school. In line with psychodynamic ideas, when starting boarding school, they may have been unconsciously driven to seek out a situation whereby they would feel like the odd one out again. As the boarding school environment requires you to fit in in order to survive, feeling like the ‘odd one out’ immediately disadvantages you and renders you easily victimised. Victimisation may persist throughout boarding school, leading to loneliness then and beyond.

The intergenerational transmission of loneliness, as discussed by Salo et al (2020), may have impacted these participants. It could be the case that participants’ parents also experienced loneliness; parental loneliness is known to significantly predict young adult loneliness (Segrin et al., 2012). Some participants also reported unsettled home lives. A lack of family cohesion is a risk factor in predicting child loneliness, so this may have also contributed to a sense of isolation at home that continued at boarding school and further.

In ‘Tough Love’, participants portray a sense of emotional disconnect from their parents, where feelings were rarely addressed. When considering attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), such parenting was described to be emotionally avoidant whilst at the same time, materially privileged. This was confusing and led to a sense of emptiness and loneliness for some participants. Some of these individuals explained that they are benefitting from therapy

now, where they are discussing early life experiences to help break down a tough boarding school shield and work out who they really are. Carl Rogers (1957) proposed three core conditions of therapeutic change, where, if the individual experienced these conditions from the therapist, a therapeutic relationship could develop, and therapeutic change could occur. The conditions are empathy - an understanding of thoughts and feelings, congruence - the therapist is genuine and real, and unconditional positive regard - the ability to be open without judgement or criticism. It may be the case that, for the participants currently in therapy, the therapist is meeting their needs in terms of these core conditions for the first time in their lives. They may have established a relationship with their therapist, whereby their inner emotional life is valued. This could have a reparative effect for them, given the unemotional connection they have experienced with their parents.

'Family Matters' discusses how the majority of participants describe a close relationship with their parents that existed before boarding school, continued throughout boarding school and remains now. These participants may have developed a secure attachment to their parents at an early age. This foundation of a secure attachment may have resulted in strong self-awareness, empathy and trust. Research indicates that securely attached individuals are independent and form strong intrapersonal relationships (Gillath et al., 2016). This may have enabled participants to create strong and long-lasting friendships that protected them from loneliness at boarding school and afterwards. No participants described their family bond changing or weakening as a result of them attending boarding school, despite existing literature recording that the family bond can change as a result of children attending (Schaverien, 2004).

5.1.7 Clinical Implications

1.1.45. Addressing mental health and loneliness in boarding school

This thesis has shed light on the importance of addressing mental health within boarding schools. It is clear that for many students there is a stigma around discussing emotions, including loneliness, within boarding school. Separation from parents, bullying and social comparison all place boarding school students at risk of emotional difficulties. Forums where loneliness can be openly discussed need to be made available for students at boarding school. This could be through mental health support workers and counsellors who are employed by boarding schools. One to one support should be available, where students can access a confidential referral to a school counsellor. Group workshops, where students are encouraged to share and reflect on their experiences with their peers may be a collaborative and cost-effective way to alleviate the stigma associated with loneliness. Classroom teachers, house parents and school nurses may also benefit from appropriate training on how to address mental health and wellbeing with students.

School-based support may provide the early intervention that is needed to target loneliness. This is particularly important given the enduring impact of loneliness and how early experiences of loneliness can be pervasive and can trigger later episodes. It is clear that for some participants in the current study, discussing experiences at boarding school in therapy now, as an adult, is helping to identify emotionally avoidant strategies that have been used since school. Earlier access to therapy may reduce distress that persists into adulthood.

Boarding schools and parents could work together to make the transition periods easier for students. A graded start and end to boarding school may benefit students and help reduce the shock of separation from parents and school staff respectively. Communicating potential difficulties with starting and leaving boarding school to both parents and children, may help normalise distress. This may alleviate initial experiences of loneliness when starting

boarding school, which are often temporary. Discussing mental health difficulties with parents and students, including loneliness, that are associated with attending boarding school may help lessen the shame and stigma around asking for support. This may help make the boarding environment a safer place to discuss emotional concerns. Strategies to enable parent-child attachments to be maintained and strengthened whilst the child is at boarding school could also be considered. More parental involvement in decision making for the child, more visits and greater opportunities for communication between the child and their parents are all ways in which relationships can be maintained and not ruptured during the boarding experience.

1.1.46. Addressing Mental Health and Loneliness in Society

This thesis not only sheds light on the issue of stigma surrounding mental health and loneliness within boarding schools, but it also draws attention to societal stigmas that exist. The fact that many ex-boarders still find it hard to seek emotional support likely reflects a continued nationwide propensity to consider discussing mental health as weak and shameful. This undoubtedly includes loneliness, despite government efforts to campaign to end loneliness. Changing how society views loneliness will take time and the government may now be under more pressure than ever to address loneliness given the COVID-19 pandemic. It may be beneficial for the Department for Education to collaborate with the current Minister for Loneliness to consider ways in which loneliness can be addressed in state, private and boarding schools, to help support a prevention rather than cure approach.

1.1.47. The Socio-Political Landscape

Boarding schools have been considered a privileged educational setting within England and form part of British heritage and history. Fees to attend often total tens of thousands of pounds per term. Because of the high cost of attendance, it is imperative to boarding schools that they uphold strong reputations as establishments where students can

thrive academically and personally. This creates a system where it is difficult for boarding schools to acknowledge potential distress that may occur for students who attend. They may feel reluctant to communicate negative psycho-social outcomes, for fear that this will deter parents and students. Furthermore, many staff and parents of children who attend boarding school, also boarded themselves. This may create a 'survivors' culture' amongst adults who then become responsible for the care of a younger generation of boarders, potentially rendering them vulnerable to the same mistreatment that they incurred.

Additionally, parents may feel a sense of denial that the institution to which they have decided to send their child, may be causing distress. It may feel inconvenient or go against family tradition to send their children to alternative educational establishments, such as state schools, where children are required to live at home full-time. Boarding schools themselves may also be trapped in a place of denial about the impact the environment is having on young people. It is costly to provide mental health support within schools and implementing services may be seen as admitting that the environment can be psychologically harmful. The boarding school system therefore appears stuck in a 'double-denial' where both the provider of the service (the school) and its customer (parents) refuse to acknowledge the harm that the recipient of the service (children) may be experiencing. As many senior government politicians attended boarding school, addressing this 'double-denial' seems systemically challenging. Cultural shifts are possible, but they require acknowledgement of a problem from all parties involved, including the government. Interventions to address loneliness and mental health for boarding school students may then be easier to implement.

5.1.8 Limitations and Strengths of the Study

The study limitations and strengths will now be considered and discussed. These will feed into recommendations for future research.

1.1.48. Study Limitations

A major limitation of the study is the sampling technique it used. Purposive sampling of friends was used initially, followed by snowball sampling of contacts known to the initial participants. This meant that the majority of participants were referred into the study by friends. Consequently, the sample is inherently skewed towards including people who were less lonely, in that they had friends. Furthermore, the friendships are likely to have been strong enough to persist into adulthood. It is therefore likely that these close friendships protected individuals from loneliness both during boarding school and in adulthood. External organisations, including Boarding School Survivors, were contacted to assist with recruitment. However, no participants were recruited using this strategy. Future research should endeavour to tap into a cohort of adult ex-boarders who were more likely to have experienced loneliness – i.e. were not referred into the study by friends. This could be attempted by increased advertisement of the study in Boarding School forums. It should be noted that boarding school forums can be biased towards people who had a particularly negative time at boarding school and are keen to discuss this as adults. Research websites, such as Call For Participants, may be a neutral platform to recruit participants into future studies.

As participation in the study was reliant upon people opting in, the sample may represent people who have particularly strong views on loneliness or their time at boarding school. It may be overlooking the views of those who do not feel strongly about these topics and are not inclined to contribute to the debate.

Erikson's 'Intimacy vs Isolation' stage of psychosocial development (1993) was used to guide the age of participants included within the study. This meant that the age of participants ranged from 22 to 31. This variation may have meant that subjects were exposed to differing degrees of mental health and pastoral support from boarding schools.

Specifically, younger generations may have been exposed to better provision of care as mental health has become less stigmatised over time. Similarly, participants who attended boarding school for a variety of different years were included in the study, ranging from two to 11 years. This may have introduced confounds into the data, as experiences of loneliness at school may differ according to the duration of attendance.

The demographic of students interviewed was limited; only white, middle-class students opted in to the research. This may reflect an overrepresentation of this demographic within the boarding school system. However, different cultures have varied views about loneliness (Sønderby & Wagoner, 2013) and the current thesis represents only a western view of the phenomenon due to using a sample which lacks diversity.

1.1.49. Strengths of the Study

Strengths of the study include the large sample size of participants interviewed, which meant that a variety of experiences was captured. Participants were both known and unknown to the interviewer which likely provided a rich array of data. The familiarity of the interviewer may have made participants comfortable to share experiences that could have been difficult to share with a stranger. On the other hand, it should be considered that respondents known to the interviewer may have been more guarded with the information that they shared, which could have restricted the depth of the information collected. However, this should have been counterbalanced by the fact that many of the respondents were totally unknown to the researcher.

The thematic analysis technique used meant that the interview process was flexible and the interviewer could respond and reorganise the interview with questions that allowed a rich exploration of narratives. This meant that themes not initially considered by the researcher – such as struggles surrounding leaving boarding school – were explored in the research. Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations for conducting thematic analysis were followed

strictly to ensure robust methodology. This included keeping a reflective diary. The diary kept by the interviewer meant that any biases that were observed were recorded and held in mind to ensure that the research was approached from a neutral stance.

The research provides insight into the impact of school experiences on loneliness; a chronic and harmful phenomenon that affects both mental and physical health. The findings shed light on the importance of providing early intervention to address loneliness for both boarding and non-boarding school students. They may also help adult ex-boarders reach out and seek therapy for past experiences that they had never previously felt able to address.

5.1.9 Further Research

As previously discussed, further research could seek to target a potentially more lonely population of ex-boarders through using different sampling techniques. This may reveal aspects of experiencing loneliness at boarding school that have not been covered in the current study. Future research could also seek to explore other areas of loneliness not developed in the current project. For example, the intergenerational transmission of loneliness could be explored by interviewing the parents of ex-boarders. This could be particularly insightful if they also attended boarding school. Future research could also aim to ask subjects how they feel loneliness could best be addressed both at school and in adulthood for ex-boarders, as this was not covered in the current study.

An additional idea for future research includes longitudinal study of experiences of children who attend boarding school, which follows on into early adulthood. Students could be interviewed at different time points, for example every two years. This could be completed with both boarders and non-boarders, to see if boarding school introduces any unique factors that impact loneliness.

The impact that COVID-19 may have had on the results of the current study should not be ignored. Additional research exploring loneliness in this sample could be conducted

outside of pandemic times, where the impact of strict lockdown measures will not influence how individuals view solitude, which could impact interview responses.

The impact of boarding school on experiences of loneliness needs to be explored in a diverse sample, including participants from an array of backgrounds. The current study included only White British participants. Research suggests that there are cultural differences in experiences of loneliness (Sønderby & Wagoner, 2013). Furthermore, the lack of diversity in the sample means that the study captures only western views of loneliness and how it is best coped with. Loneliness was largely viewed by subjects as an individual problem, where the individual is responsible for alleviating the issue. This reflects a broader Western view of the treatment of problems, in line with a more medical model. It sits in contrast to other cultural views, for example in the East, where illness is considered more holistically (Jovicic & McPherson, 2020). Spirituality, family and societal factors are considered more in other cultures. Therefore, it could be beneficial to explore loneliness outside of the western culture to see how views on loneliness differ, as these could impact its management within diverse populations. It may also shed light on less medicalised ways of addressing loneliness, highlighting forms of social and community-based interventions, which could lessen the number of GP appointments made to discuss loneliness, reducing pressure on the NHS.

5.1.10 Reflections and Learning

As I have completed this thesis I have become increasingly aware of my bias against the boarding school and private school systems. I have noticed myself comparing participants' schooling experiences with my own state education and constantly questioning the merits of the two-tiered education system within the UK. These thoughts have been influenced by a number of factors. Firstly, both my mother and sister are teachers within state schools and are proud to be able to support children and young people who are underprivileged. Secondly, I am aware of the 'rose-tinted' view I hold of my own state

education, which makes me question the need to pay for education. I was fortunate to attend a state school rated as 'outstanding' and return home to a loving family at the end of each day. Thirdly, I have constantly held in mind the experiences of my friends who attended boarding school and how they have always struggled to spend time alone since we met at university. This persists now, as adults in our early 30's. These factors, in conjunction with my experience of having a close family, have resulted in a negative bias against boarding school. It has also been important to hold in mind my own personal enjoyment of solitude and remember that there is no right or wrong way to experience time alone.

As a result of these biases, it was important that I created equal space for both positive and negative accounts of boarding school during the interview and analysis processes and not emphasise the negative. This was vital, given the many positive accounts of boarding school that participants gave.

I also battled with my own views of seeing boarding school as a 'privileged' environment, which brought to light many of my own classist beliefs. I noticed that I can hold an "us and them" view of individuals who were privately educated, despite having many friends who went through the private and boarding school system. I wondered if this was not only influenced by my experience of being state educated, but also as a result of working within the NHS, where I spend the majority of my time supporting people from a lower socio-economic background. It is important that I keep this bias in mind as I progress through my clinical career and continue to work with and learn from individuals from both education systems.

More than anything, the project has made me feel grateful for the close and supportive family that I have always been able to go home to. It has cemented a view that I have continuously held about the importance of emotional connection to others over material possessions, a view which drove me to pursue a career in clinical psychology. This research

has enabled me to learn about the importance of early, secure attachment to reliable caregivers and how protective this can be throughout life. I hope that this project can contribute towards enabling boarding school students to feel safe, secure and wanted despite living away from their families.

5.1.11 Conclusion

In conclusion, the aim of the thesis was to explore experiences of loneliness in adult ex-boarders. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 18 ex-boarders aged between 22 and 31. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts. The themes that were constructed highlighted the vast variation in how loneliness is defined and how it is uniquely experienced. Experiences of loneliness at boarding school were common and were often caused by bullying and a reluctance to share feelings of distress due to stigma. They were short-lived for some, but for others they persisted throughout school and have resulted in behaviours that have kept that individual feeling lonely into adulthood. Many participants reported having a network of close and supportive friends at boarding school, which protected them from loneliness as a student and continues to protect them from loneliness as an adult. Some participants reported a difficult home life, where they have always felt like the ‘odd one out’ for a number of reasons. This has been a lonely experience that continued in boarding school and continues now, in adulthood. The majority of participants reported a loving and secure family life that remained unchanged despite their attendance at boarding school. They feel this family bond has protected them against severe loneliness. Despite this, attending boarding school may create a propensity to feel lonely in the presence of others that occurs at school and can continue to occur in adulthood. Some participants are currently receiving therapy to address aspects of their identity that they feel have been impacted by boarding school.

Adult ex-boarders may therefore be vulnerable to experiencing loneliness. Avoidant coping styles, developed at boarding school, may have perpetuated into adulthood. This makes it difficult to identify, discuss and address loneliness now. This may be an adaptive coping mechanism for some, where loneliness is effectively ignored. Others may feel a sense of distress and isolation, where they are unsure of how to help themselves manage loneliness. Furthermore, this coping mechanism may eventually crack and result in a heightened sense of loneliness and uncertainty surrounding who the 'true self' is for some ex-boarders.

The thesis has highlighted a need to try to reduce loneliness for boarding school students. Boarding schools should clearly communicate that loneliness is a common experience for students during their time at boarding school. This should be communicated to both students and parents before they start attending, so that the experience is normalised upon entry. Normalisation may make it easier to address and discuss when loneliness is experienced.

Strategies to maintain and reinforce parent-child attachments whilst the child is at boarding school should be considered as well as techniques to tackle bullying. Compassionate approaches to addressing homesickness and loneliness should be used. This may prevent issues that could go on to impact wellbeing into adulthood. The project has also highlighted a need for loneliness to be normalised more widely in society. Discussing loneliness may help to alleviate distress for adults. Adults, particularly ex-boarders, may be reluctant to seek support for loneliness due to the shame and stigma that still surrounds mental health. Community interventions that take a socially focussed approach to targeting loneliness may help reduce the number of GP referrals made to discuss loneliness and reduce pressure on the NHS. Improving conversations about loneliness may reduce shame and increase access to support.

Completing this thesis has helped me gain valuable insight into experiences of loneliness for adult ex-boarders. It has shed light on some of the psychological and social impacts of attending boarding school whilst also improving my understanding of the phenomenon of loneliness. I look forward to considering these insights in both my clinical and research work moving forward.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Email invitation sent to prospective study participants known to the Lead Researcher

Email invitation to participate in the Research Project: "Exploring the impact of attending boarding school on experiences of loneliness"

Subject: Invitation to participate in the Research Project: "Exploring the impact of attending boarding school on experiences of loneliness"

Dear X

My name is Caroline Floyd and I am a Trainee Clinical Psychologist in the Department of Health and Social Care at the University of Essex. I am emailing you to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is taking place and what it will involve. Please take time to read the attached information sheet carefully.

If you would like to participate in the study and meet the inclusion criteria stated in the information sheet, please complete the attached consent form and return it to this email address by TBC.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Kind regards,

Caroline Floyd, Lead Researcher

Appendix B: Participant information sheet attached to the email invitation

Participant information sheet for the Research Project: "Exploring the impact of attending boarding school on experiences of loneliness"

What is the purpose of the study?

Loneliness is a growing public health concern within the UK. For some, loneliness can be recurrent; many adults who report feeling lonely report that they felt lonely earlier in life. The school environment may be a key setting where experiences of loneliness are first felt and continue to impact socialisation into adulthood. Boarding school students may be particularly vulnerable to such experiences, due to separation from family and increased exposure to bullying and victimisation. I am conducting research into the impact that attending boarding school may have had on experiences of loneliness during childhood and adulthood. Interviews will be held with ex-boarders aged between 21 to 39. This project is being undertaken as part of my Doctorate in Clinical Psychology and the research will run from September 2020 until April 2022.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been identified as an individual aged between 21 to 39 who attended boarding school.

Have you ever experienced feeling lonely? If not, then please do not participate as the study is exploring experiences of loneliness in boarding school alumni.

Do you have a current or enduring mental health condition that makes talking about life experiences difficult? If so, then please do not participate as it may be distressing for you.

Do I have to take part?

Participation is entirely at your discretion. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to provide written consent, by emailing the consent form attached to this email back to me. You are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason, by contacting me using the details at the bottom of this email.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be invited to take part in a video conferencing interview at a mutually convenient time. This will be conducted with me and will be audio-recorded. The interview should last around an hour.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

The interview questions will explore experiences of loneliness throughout life including at boarding school and during adulthood. These may feel distressing to answer for individuals who had difficult experiences. Please do not take part if you feel that participation will be distressing for you. If you feel distressed after the interview, the following support lines are free and available to contact:

Samaritans: 16123 (24 hours helpline)

Mind: 03001233393 (Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)

What are the possible advantages of taking part?

Some people find that reflecting on their life experience is a rewarding process.

The results of the study may reveal factors associated with boarding school experience and loneliness. These may help inform age appropriate interventions that address the kind of loneliness experienced in adulthood.

What information will be collected?

Answers to interview questions will be audio recorded and then written up by myself. Demographic information will also be collected. Please note, you will not be asked to provide the name of the school you attended.

Will my information be kept confidential?

Your confidentiality will be maintained at all times. If, during the interview, you express that you are having thoughts of wishing to harm yourself or others, confidentiality may be broken and an organisation such as the police or the NHS may be contacted.

Interviews will be audio recorded and stored in a password protected computer file on a secure server. Data will be transcribed by me and will be anonymised. If data which you provide is used in any publications or reports, a participant number will be used and identifying details will be removed. A list may be kept linking participant numbers or pseudonyms to names, but this will be kept securely and will only be accessible to myself and my supervisor. A copy of the information which we record about you, but not other participants, will be provided, free of charge, on request. In line with the University's Research Data Management Policy, it is recommended that research data is kept in a data archive for a period of ten years after project completion and made available for access and re-use where legally, ethically and commercially appropriate. After ten years the data will be electronically deleted.

What is the legal basis for using the data and who is the Data Controller?

Your data will be used after you have returned a signed copy of the consent form attached to this email to me, the Lead Researcher. This can be returned via email to cf19872@essex.ac.uk or by clicking 'reply' to this email. I will be managing the data collected. The University of Essex is considered the official Data Controller and Sara Stock, University Information Assurance Manager (dpo@essex.ac.uk), is the contact for this.

What should I do if I want to take part?

You can 'opt-in' to participating in this research by returning a signed copy of the consent form attached to this email to me, the Lead Researcher. This can be returned via email to cf19872@essex.ac.uk or by clicking 'reply' to this email.

Please confirm your opt in no later than TBC.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the study will form my Doctoral thesis. They may be published as a journal article or used as a conference paper or presentation so will be in the public domain. All results will be anonymised and you will not be identifiable. During the interview you can indicate that you would like to receive a copy of the thesis, which can be posted or emailed to you once complete.

Who is funding the research?

An application for funding will be made to Profico, a professional development scheme for postgraduate students that is unique to the University of Essex.

Who has reviewed the study?

The University of Essex Ethics Review Committee has reviewed and approved the study.

Questions, Concerns and Complaints

If you have any questions or concerns about any aspect of the study or you have a complaint, in the first instance please contact the Lead Researcher of the project, Caroline Floyd. Use the contact details below. If you are still concerned, you think your complaint has not been addressed to your satisfaction or you feel that you cannot approach the principal investigator, please contact the departmental Director of Research in the department responsible for this project, Gill Green (e-mail gillgr@essex.ac.uk). If you are still not satisfied, please contact the University's Research Governance and Planning Manager, Sarah Manning-Press (e-mail sarahm@essex.ac.uk).

Name of the Researcher

Lead Researcher: Caroline Floyd

Email: cf19872@essex.ac.uk

Telephone number: 07979875354

Postal address: The University of Essex School of Health and Social Care, Colchester Campus, CO43SQ

Research Supervisor

Professor Penny Cavenagh

Appendix C: Consent form attached to email invitation sent to prospective participants known to the lead researcher

Participant consent form for the Research Project: "Exploring the impact of attending boarding school on experiences of loneliness"

Dear Participant,

This research is being carried out by Caroline Floyd under the supervision of Professor Penny Cavenagh.

We are investigating the impact that attending boarding school may have had on experiences of loneliness in a group of adult boarding school alumni.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be interviewed by the researcher via video conferencing. The answers which you provide will be recorded through audio recording.

All information collected will be kept confidentially and securely and will only be accessible by myself and my supervisor.

Data will be anonymised and if data which you provide is used in any publications or reports then a participant number will be used and identifying details will be removed. A list may be kept linking participant numbers to names, but this will be kept securely and will only be accessible by myself and my supervisor. A copy of the information which we record about you, but not other participants, will be provided, free of charge, on request.

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving reasons and without penalty, even after the data has been collected. However, if publications or reports have already been disseminated based on this data, these cannot be withdrawn.

We would be very grateful for your participation in this study. If you need to contact us in future, please contact me (cf19872@essex.ac.uk) or Professor Penny Cavenagh at p.cavenagh@UOS.AC.UK. You can also contact us in writing at: EBS, University of Essex, Colchester CO4 3SQ.

Yours faithfully,

Caroline Floyd

Statement of Consent	**Please initial each box**
• I agree to participate in the research project, *"Exploring the impact of attending boarding school on experiences of loneliness"* being carried out by Caroline Floyd via video conferencing.	☐
• This agreement has been given voluntarily and without coercion.	☐
• I understand that I will be asked questions about experiences of loneliness throughout my life during the interview.	☐
• I have been given full information about the study and contact details of the researcher(s).	☐
• I have read and understood the information provided above.	☐
• I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research and my participation in it.	☐
• I agree that my information can be quoted in research outputs.	☐

_____

_____

Participant's signature **Date**

Please provide your name and number below:

Participant's name:

Participant's telephone number:

Appendix D: Recruitment poster

University of Essex

Did you go to boarding school?

Are you aged between 21 to 39?

Have you ever experienced feeling lonely?

Loneliness is an epidemic which may be influenced by school environment. I am conducting a study to explore experiences of loneliness in boarding school alumni.

Participants will complete an interview over video conferencing which will investigate experiences of loneliness at boarding school and in adulthood. Friendships and bullying will also be discussed, as well as strategies used to cope with social difficulties and loneliness.

Participants need to have attended boarding school/s for any duration of time and have experienced feeling lonely at some point in their life.

The study is being conducted from a neutral position and you will not be asked to name the boarding school you attended.

Please email Caroline Floyd, Trainee Clinical Psychologist, for a study invitation or for more information:

cf19872@essex.ac.uk

Appendix E: Draft demographic questions and interview transcript

Name: Participant identifier:

Age: Gender:

Ethnicity: Relationship status:

Employment status:

Who do you live with?

Do you have children?

How many boarding schools did you attend?

At what age did you start boarding school?

For how many years did you attend boarding school?

Were you involved in the decision to attend boarding school? Yes/no

Do you experience or have a diagnosed mental health problem(s)?

Have you ever received psychological support such as psychotherapy?

Introduction

Discuss information on participant information form. Make sure subject is comfortable. Explain that I would like to hear thoughts and experiences.

Experiences of loneliness in adulthood

Can you talk to me about experiences of loneliness during your adult life if you have had any?

Prompts:

How long did it last for?

Was it first time that you had felt that way?

Was that the most lonely that you have ever felt?

What did you do to cope?

Loneliness during boarding school

Can you talk to me about experiences of loneliness during your time at boarding school if you had any?

Promts:

Why do you think you felt that way?

How long did it last for?

Was it the first time you felt that way?

Was the most lonely that you have ever felt?

What did you do to cope?

Relationships during boarding school

Can you talk to me about your relationships during boarding school?

Prompts:

Did you have a lot of friends?

Did you have any close friends?

How easy did you find it making friends?

Were you ever bullied/victimized?

Did you have any romantic relationships?

Debrief

Thank subject for their time. Discuss next steps. Confirm if they would like to receive results/ copy of thesis. Ask if they have any feedback.

Appendix F: Risk management form

University of Essex

File name:	Risk assessment ETH1920-0949		
Risk assessment reference:	ETH1920-0949	Version number:	1

Risk assessment

Description of activity / area being assessed	Interview data collection for the qualitative study: "Exploring the impact of attending boarding school on experiences of loneliness" Participants will complete an interview with the Lead Researcher via video conferencing where they will be asked questions about experiences of loneliness throughout their life. They may feel distressed during, or after, answering these questions.	**Location**	Participant's home (interview to be conducted via video link)
Manager responsible	Professor Penny Cavenagh (Research Supervisor)	**Signature & date**	Penny Cavenagh 08/07/20
Assessed by (name & role)	Caroline Floyd (Lead Researcher)	**Signature & assessment date**	CFLOYD 08/07/2020
Review (date & reason)	20/12/2020 – four months after data collection starts		

Hazard (H) hazardous event (HE) consequence (C)	Who might be harmed	Current controls	Current risk LxC=R	Additional controls needed to reduce risk	Residual risk LxC=R	Target Date	Date achieved
Participant answering questions about experiences of loneliness. This may	The participant	All participants will be provided with the telephone numbers for two free support lines before the interview	Fairly likely X moderate, MEDIUM	Participants with current or past mental health issues will be encouraged to self-	Unlikely X moderate, LOW	Before data collection starts	

Consequence						
	Catastrophic	Medium	High	Very High	Very high	Very High
	Major	Low	Medium	High	High	Very High
	Moderate	Very low	Low	Medium	Medium	High
	Minor	Very low	Low	Low	Medium	Medium
	Insignificant	Very low	Very low	Low	Low	Low
	R = LxC	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Fairly likely	Likely	Very likely
		Likelihood of hazardous event				

Hazard (H) hazardous event (HE) consequence (C)	Who might be harmed	Current controls	Current risk LxC=R	Additional controls needed to reduce risk	Residual risk LxC=R	Target Date	Date achieved
feel distressing during, or after, answering these questions.		starts: - Samaritans: 16123 (free 24 hours helpline) - Mind: 03001233393 (Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)	RISK	exclude from study participation.	RISK		

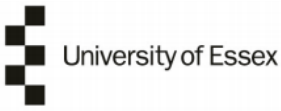
Add more rows if needed

Periodic Review

Review date:					
Review by:					
Signed:					

If there are changes, please save assessment as a new version and archive previous version.

Appendix G: Ethics committee decision



16/07/2020

Ms Caroline Floyd

Health and Social Care

University of Essex

Dear Caroline,

Ethics Committee Decision

I am writing to advise you that your research proposal entitled "Exploring the impact of attending boarding school on experiences of loneliness" has been reviewed by the Science and Health Ethics Sub Committee.

The Committee is content to give a favourable ethical opinion of the research. I am pleased, therefore, to tell you that your application has been granted ethical approval by the Committee.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information or have any queries.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Camille Cronin

Appendix H: Example of coding using NVivo software