

Conversation on Method: Merging Sociology and Art to capture loneliness in later life

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Reaching in and out

Loneliness – commonly defined as a subjective feeling of missing companionship and lacking meaningful relationships – is, for sociologists, both a personal and a social issue.ⁱ Although loneliness affects the person, it is not merely an individual issue. Loneliness is expressed and determined by wider social contexts, from societal values like individualisation to social devaluation processes like stigma.ⁱⁱ This is particularly true for older Australians (aged 65+) who live with frailty and/or in living settings, such as aged care homes (nursing homes).ⁱ These circumstances create numerous barriers to the development and maintenance of meaningful interactions with others. In researching aged care homes, we found that older people are frequently blamed for their own loneliness. They are often encouraged to be more 'resilient' or 'positive', as if they could completely change their individual circumstances. This exacerbates the stigma of loneliness since being lonely is associated with personal failings and lack of social skills.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, the residents we interviewed reported hesitance in disclosing feelings of loneliness to loved ones, choosing to suffer in silence.^{iv} Yet prolonged loneliness among older people encompasses immense emotional suffering; it also increases the risk of social exclusion and several health conditions that require long-term care, such as dementia.^v

It was in this context that a collaboration began, between me (Barbara),¹ a sociologist and Josephine Wilson, a creative writer. I had a growing awareness that I was not meeting my expectations as a scientific communicator: when presenting my research at community events and public lectures, I was

¹ This project was led by the first author, Barbara Barbosa Neves. The research team included Alexandra Sanders (University of Melbourne and Monash University), who assisted with data collection and analysis, and Renata Kokanović (RMIT), who supported data analysis.

constantly confronted by a barrage of ageist comments and questions, such as: ‘old people are always grumpy and that’s why they’re lonely’, ‘why not studying children instead, you know the future?’, or ‘Barbara, you look so young why are you interested in the elderly?’ These reactions confirmed that I was not facilitating a deeper understanding of my research and, ultimately, I was failing my participants. If we, as a society, are not taking loneliness in later life seriously – as well as its social nature – we are failing to include, empower, and value older people who feel lonely.

Amid this professional and personal dilemma, I read Josephine Wilson’s Miles Franklin winning novel *Extinctions* (2016). As I was reading the book, I realised that this work of fiction fully covered my research topics – but, it addressed them in an evocative and meaningful way. In fact, feeling lonely is almost like feeling extinct – that no one “cares about us anymore”, as described by so many of my participants. In her novel, Josephine rejects the common old age tropes, pervasive in a contemporary western society that devalues ageing and frailty. Her characters are complex, not templates or scripts of what we assume older people to be like: dependent and passive, or privileged and selfish. As a passionate reader of fiction, I have always been aware of the power of good storytelling. So, I thought that creative storytelling could be a fruitful technique to explore new ways of communicating my research, and that Josephine could be the right person to help me in this endeavour. I contacted Josephine and invited her to embark on an unusual partnership: to write creative stories based on my research.

Josephine accepted the challenge – or “a real gift and a real opportunity”, as she put it – and received my data from a six-month qualitative study conducted in two aged care facilities in Victoria, Australia. Data included field notes of ethnographic observations of the everyday life of the facilities as well as transcripts and audio interviews with residents feeling lonely. Of the 22 interviewees, we selected two participants to be the basis for the creative stories.^{vi} In a collection about the value of ‘small’ data, we are compelled to believe that we do not need to justify sample size or explain why we only chose two case studies. Nonetheless, we employ the term ‘small data’ here to refer to two cases drawn from the larger project, following the tradition of qualitative case studies.^{vii} This type of qualitative research in sociology is concerned with the instances of meaning that we are able to identify in our data rather than the number of interviewees or cases – it is about quality, not quantity. We further contend that small sociological data are not small in meaning and scope, and sometimes not even in size if we consider the wealth of data created. The two selected cases illustrated the overall themes identified in the analysis of the whole dataset, while providing rich accounts of lived experiences of profound loneliness.

Building in

When we started our collaboration, our aim was to only produce creative stories. However, we felt the need to compare how departing from different disciplines – creative writing and sociology – would frame our understandings of the research data. Thus, we engaged with both sociological and creative narratives. We use the term creative narratives to encompass Josephine’s creative stories, which included both creative fiction and non-fiction; and use the term sociological narratives to comprise the sociological accounts written to capture our participants’ loneliness.^{viii} In this section, we include a conversation on the narrative method, adapted from an interview given to the Narrative Now podcast.² We see this phase of our collaboration as a *building in* process, which involves building and developing narratives within each disciplinary background.

How do you approach narrative as a method?

Barbara: I will focus on sociological narratives, which are the types of narratives that I worked and work with. Sociological narratives allow us to bring together the individual and social dimensions of what we are studying. It allows for not just a description of a participant, but a description of their social roles, contexts, practices – and in the case of my participants, their structural vulnerabilities in terms of living settings (nursing homes), social and spatial dynamics, health conditions, and so on. And more and more I believe that sociological narratives are crucial to think about loneliness, because although loneliness is often seen as an individual or a private issue, sociologists approach it as social and public issue as well. Loneliness is a complex topic. Yet, it is usually framed within a psychological discourse or narrative that sometimes pathologises loneliness, makes it a disease, and puts the onus on the individual (if you could just be more pro-active about it, you wouldn’t be lonely), overlooking the social nature of the phenomenon. Sociological narratives allow us to bring back to the table that discussion; that loneliness is both a personal and social issue in its nature but also in its consequences. The sociological narratives facilitate merging and bringing together those individual and social dimensions without breaking them down into finite themes and codes that we need to quantify. Sociological narratives present and offer us with a rich way of

² Narrative Now Podcast, Ashley Barnwell and Signe Ravn, 2022, <https://blogs.unimelb.edu.au/narrative-network/2022/07/31/episode-eight-narrative-research-meets-creative-writing-with-barbara-barbosa-neves-and-josephine-wilson/>

representing complex social worlds, particularly when we think about loneliness and later life and how they interact.

Josephine: I would make a distinction to a degree between the idea of a discourse and a narrative. Psychological discourse does – as you say – make the individual the agent of change and responsible for their own agency: ‘it’s all in your head’, the whole wellness industry is that kind of idea if one gets up and gets going, one will recover. But I think, for me, a strong idea of narrative is the idea of connectivity between different periods, either structurally in a story or in one’s own life, and the meaning one makes of those moments and the way they connect. And the way that, in narratives, things seem to lead to things and have causality. What I really found most powerful in the stories that Barbara and her team captured through talking to people was the sense that their narrative, the meaning of life if you’d like, that narrative ends in death, but the sense that there was no narrative, there was no sense of events leading beyond where they were. So, there’s a sense in which they have been reduced from the flow of life or taken out of the context of life, where things happen, and just placed in these situations where they felt completely severed from the larger flows and narratives of life. There’s that idea that one almost does not deserve a significant ending – and having no sense of control over one’s own ending, and where one is in those later periods of life, is fundamentally traumatising. And you see that in the way that participants spoke about loss of wife, loss of family, the spatial difference of a home as opposed to the home. And so, for me, narrative is not just about the discourse that people are in but also whether one feels that events can be stitched together and brought into some sort of relationship, so I can say: ‘Ah, I can see how that led me here’ or ‘I can see why I made that choice’ – even if we are rewriting the narrative about the past in the present. A lot of narrative therapy will now encourage people to write their story in a different way, which emphasises different events, as if you are constructing a new autobiography for oneself. And trying to recover from trauma might mean not to focus on that trauma or that you need to focus on that trauma. The problem with loneliness and ageing is that people are not allowed to feel that their story continues.

From this short dialogue, we can already see how the different types of narratives complement each other, including diverse understandings of linearity and temporality. But it is to this process of bringing together narratives that we now turn our attention to.

Building out

After building in, came the necessary stage of *building out* to link our work. For that, we decided to reconfigure our ‘small’ data through crystallization, which is a qualitative approach concerned with deepening our grasp of a topic by describing its various angles like in a crystal.^{ix} Crystallization combines multiple genres, through an integration of sciences and arts, to explore new ways of comprehending and representing research findings.^x Thus, it allows for deeper engagement with ‘small’ sociological cases by bringing together different genres, from fiction writing to poetry. Crystallization is also concerned with an ethics of representation, namely how we make sense and denote narratives, perceptions, and lived experiences of people placed in marginalised positions in society.^{xi} We were further motivated by an ethos that does not neglect researchers’ positionality and power or the effects of extracting stories of social inequality and distress for academic gain. Within this framework and associated concerns, we connected the creative and sociological narratives to bring together different interpretations and disciplines. Next, we contextualise and share excerpts from this work, illustrating the building out stage.

Gurney

Gurney, in his 90s at the time of the interview, had a witty sense of humour.³ He hated Bingo nights and wanted to join a youth club. Gurney had been living in an aged care facility for many years and felt extremely lonely, particularly since his wife of 65 years had passed. His humour was a common coping mechanism for his loneliness. Passionate about planes, he even had a flight simulator in his computer. He loved to complain about safety issues in the care home. But he felt constantly ignored and dismissed by staff, because of his age and frailty.

One of Josephine’s stories about Gurney was entitled ‘Gurney flies from loneliness’. In this story, Gurney escapes the facility piloting a Cessna 172 Skyhawk:

Gurney was at the controls, on the deck, and he was master of his destiny.

No more doors wedged open so the staff could duck their heads into his room to tick off that box to confirm No. 7 was still upright, semi-sentient and half-alive!

³ Pseudonym chosen by participant.

No more bed baths. No more pureed food eaten under neon. No more cold tea and cheap biscuits.

No more Bingo.

Bingo!



Figure 1: Gurney's escape illustrated by Alexandra Sanders

Patricia

Patricia, in her 70s at the time of the interview, was used to the silent suffering of loneliness.⁴ Moments of reticence, sadness, and hesitation punctuated her interview. When we interviewed her, she was seated at her favourite chair. It is where she sits all day, often looking outside of her window as life

⁴ Pseudonym chosen by participant.

goes on, she explained. Patricia has a “beautiful” family, but they do not visit as often anymore. Why? Because they are too busy. She had a full life; Patricia made sure to emphasise that repeatedly. She had no one at the aged care facility to really talk to, but she had trees outside her window. She was attached to those trees, as they signified constant presence and company. They are always there with her, being mentioned countless times during our conversation.

Josephine’s story captures the interview with Patricia, highlighting the heaviness of loneliness in later life and how it intersects with the stigma of being old and frail. It also captures the role of the interviewer, as illustrated by some excerpts from the creative non-fiction story, included below.

Patricia is seventy-nine and likes to look at trees, but Patricia is not a tree.

The first thing Patricia notices is that the woman is very young.

They’ve got it all wrong. There is nothing gradual or graceful in decline. And never mind how you feel inside; they all glance at you and call you old and frail.

Patricia really loves this girl who has come to talk to her. She loves everything about her, from the way she leans towards her in the chair, to how she carefully records Patricia’s every word, as if Patricia really mattered. This young woman is listening so hard that Patricia is afraid of disappointing her.

There are so many ways Patricia feels lonely, but she has never been one for words and she can’t see the point of all this talk about loneliness. Everyone knows that loneliness is the opposite of words. Loneliness doesn’t speak. It is dead silent. Loneliness is a fact. The fact is, you are lonely.

Patricia’s favorite thing is to sit and look out the window. She looks at the cars. She looks the trees. She is lucky. Patricia does not want a better room upstairs; she just wants her trees.

Look at that: cars, people, dogs walking. You’re not lonely when you have a view.

Why can’t I be happy like the trees are?



Figure 2: Patricia's trees illustrated by Alexandra Sanders

Bridging Across

This final stage – which is still ongoing – entails not only disseminating this work across diverse publics; it also includes employing the creative narratives and merged perspectives to better understand the topic under investigation, our role in the research process, and our positionality regarding how we study and represent people from marginalised circumstances. For example, the creative narratives teased out the researchers' role – from the language commonly used to describe participants (e.g., “frail”), to how interviewees react to the presence of interviewers – contributing to a richer discussion of representational and empirical principles to bridge across disciplines and audiences.

Bridging across, therefore, means firstly to reflect on an ethics of representation every time we share the creative narratives to ensure participants' voices are not seen as homogenous or unidimensional accounts of loneliness and their reality. It further means continuously considering our power and privilege as researchers, storytellers, and even gatekeepers as we decide what to include and exclude when communicating research findings. We have been reflecting on these issues as we shared the creative stories in public talks and media interviews. While the COVID-19 pandemic has limited a wider participation in events, we were still able to engage with varied publics online and in person – from students to media users/consumers. This has allowed us to gauge public reactions to the creative narratives, which have been extremely positive and reassuring of our goals. Since reading these creative stories instead of the usual power point, the recurrent ageist comments and questions outlined at the onset of this piece have ceased. For example, in 2021, the coverage of the creative narratives in *The Age* and in *The Sydney Morning Herald* by journalist Jewel Topsfield accrued many supportive online comments challenging ageism (Figure 3).^{xii} It also resulted in an incredible number of emails from people telling us about their own experiences of loneliness, ageing, and aged care facilities.

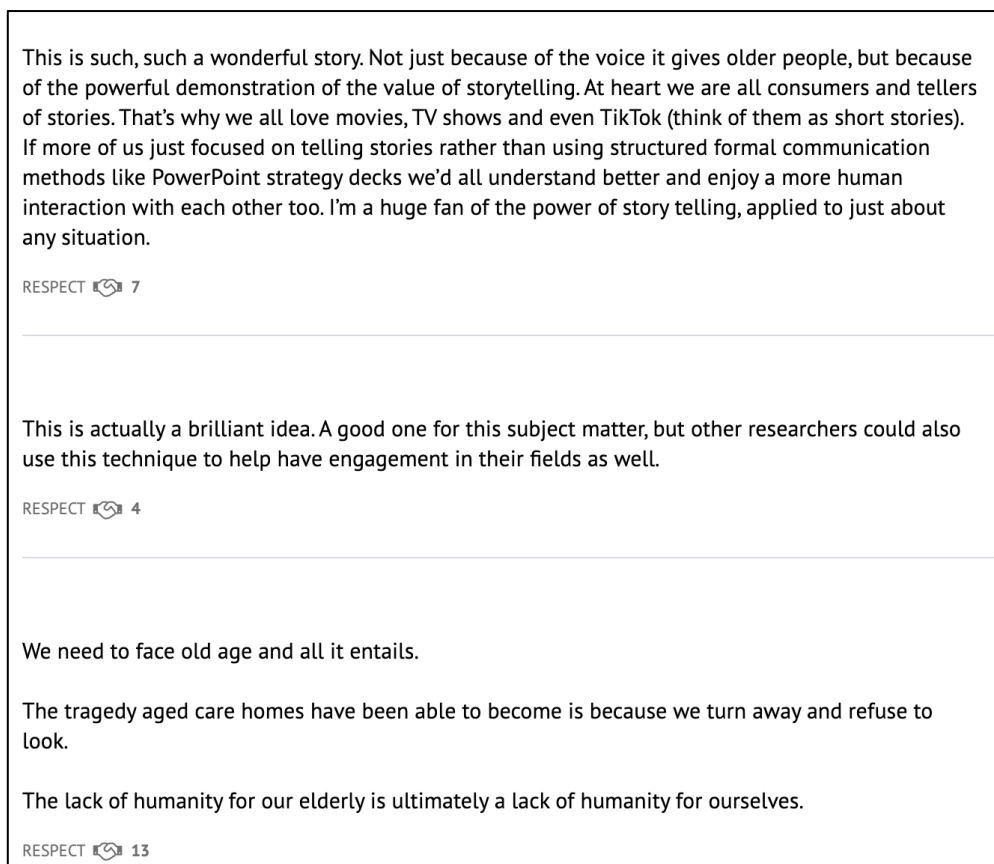


Figure 3: Examples of public comments on media pieces (*The Sydney Morning Herald*)

We purposively chose to share the creative narratives with Jewel Topsfield because of her outstanding journalistic ethic and well-documented respect for those she covers in her work. But media participation shone light on other unintended issues that might arise from creative collaborations. For instance, the piece included pictures of us, which led to online discussions about our appearance, detracting from our participants. Additionally, as the audio versions of the creative stories included in the piece became popular, ads were added to the start of the audio files, advertising products such as dog food. These examples demonstrate the need for ongoing reflexivity about ethics of representation, particularly when aiming to amplify the voices of groups that face structural vulnerabilities and are exposed to social devaluation(s).

We argue that rich small data reconfigured through creative practice and placed within an ongoing reflective practice can assist in combatting the appropriation of personal stories or testimonies that are sometimes used uncritically by organisations and researchers.^{xiii} A notable reminder of the need to question this appropriation was illustrated by the community event ‘Recovering Our Stories’ that took place in Toronto, Canada, in 2011. This initiative was organised as an act of resistance by psychiatric survivors/patients, whose stories of mental health issues were commodified and co-opted by biomedical corporations and groups. Under the fitting slogan “Hands Off Our Stories”, the event facilitated a multifaceted discussion of how these extractive neoliberal practices disregard “the original purpose of storytelling to work towards radical change”.^{xiv} Thus, to uphold the value of our combination of small rich data and creative stories as a tool of agency and change, we must consider our privilege and the interests at play, asking who gains and who loses from these academic exercises.

Secondly, bridging across, also means going beyond the crystallization of narratives for dissemination to uncover new epistemologies (knowledge production), methodologies (methods), and axiologies (values). Crystallization is not a method used to essentialise a topic; rather, it is employed to see and embrace different angles and outcomes. From the creative narratives, we gained a sense of continuity and discontinuity between past and present in ageing and loneliness experiences, which were described more linearly in the sociological narratives. We further benefited from an approach to loneliness and institutionalisation that was more sensorial – calling attention to movement, sound, and sensory feelings. For example, Gurney escapes his entrapment at the care home by flying away from loneliness, from the food, and from the emotions associated with institutionalisation. Patricia has a view of trees and activity outside of her bedroom, contrasting with her quiet and resigned demeanour while she sits in her chair all day feeling the ‘dead silence’ and ‘stillness’ of the loneliness inside of her. This crystallization process enabled multiple understandings of loneliness, permitting to zooming in and

out of personal and social experiences and contexts. It also eased a connecting between past and present dimensions of participants' lives. Moreover, crystallization opens up novel possibilities, as narratives offer an opportunity to make sense of the future too, through the potential of the narrative method for prospective social action.^{xv} This social action can, for instance, encompass not only addressing loneliness in later life more creatively but also informing more artfully sociological methods and praxis.

The outlined opportunities and gains do not mean that constant reflexivity is not needed regarding methodological and representational choices. Continuing to bridge across reminds us that, as Ashley Barnwell has noted, “Method is not without agency”.^{xvi} Every method and practice can simultaneously include and exclude. While we centered understandings of exclusion in our reflective approaches, we – as researchers, storytellers, and communicators – are still gatekeepers regardless of method and practice. Crystallization does, nonetheless, recognise those limitations, whilst facilitating art and science partnerships to better explore such shortcomings. Additionally, crystallization recognises the messiness of research, fieldwork, and interdisciplinary collaborations. Through the stages of *reaching in/out*, *building in/on*, and *bridging across* we have illustrated that small data are not only beautiful in the way they open these kinds of possibilities for deeper, diverse, and generative engagement with stories and voices, but they are also critical to address knowledge gaps and ethics of representation of marginalised and stigmatised groups.

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ⁱ Barbara Barbosa Neves, Alexandra Sanders & Renata Kokanović, “It’s the worst bloody feeling in the world’: Experiences of loneliness and social isolation among older people living in care homes”, *Journal of Aging Studies*, 49 (2019): 74–84.

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- ⁱⁱ Barbara Barbosa Neves, David Colón Cabrera, Alexandra Sanders and Narelle Warren, “Pandemic diaries: Lived experiences of loneliness, loss, and hope among older adults during COVID-19”, *The Gerontologist* (2022)
- ⁱⁱⁱ See: Ibid., and Neves et al., (2019).
- ^{iv} Neves et al. (2019).
- ^v Neves et al. (2022)
- ^{vi} See: Barbara Barbosa Neves, Josephine Wilson, Alexandra Sanders and Renata Kokanović, “Using crystallization to understand loneliness in later life: Integrating social science and creative narratives in sensitive qualitative research”, *Qualitative Research* (2021), 17.
- ^{vii} Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (SAGE Publications, 2009).
- ^{viii} A full comparison of the two types of narratives can be found in Neves et al. (2019).
- ^{ix} See: Laura Ellingson, *Engaging Crystallization in Qualitative Research: An Introduction* (SAGE Publications, 2008) and Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, “Writing: A Method of Inquiry”, Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (SAGE Publications, 2005).
- ^x Ellingson (2008).
- ^{xi} Neves et al. (2021).
- ^{xii} Jewel Topsfield “No more bingo! How creative writing is telling the true story of loneliness in old age”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 May 2021: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/no-more-bingo-how-creative-writing-is-telling-the-true-story-of-loneliness-in-old-age-20210507-p57prk.html>
- ^{xiii} Lucy Costa, Jijian Voronka, Danielle Landry, Jenna Reid, Becky Mcfarlane, David Reville and Kathryn Church, “Recovering our Stories: A Small Act of Resistance”, *Studies in Social Justice*, 6.1: 85–101.
- ^{xiv} Ibid., 87.
- ^{xv} Ditte Andersen, Signe Ravn and Rachel Thomson, “Narrative sense-making and prospective social action: Methodological challenges and new directions”, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 23, 4 (2020): 367–375
- ^{xvi} Ashley Barnwell, “Method Matters: The Ethics of Exclusion”, Vicki Kirby (ed.), *What if Culture was Nature all Along?* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017): 34.