



A prisoner of one's own mind: Identifying and understanding existential isolation[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Although often treated as a singular construct, social isolation can assume an interpersonal or an existential form (Yalom, 1980). Here we develop an individual difference measure of existential isolation, or, isolation with regard to one's experience of reality (Pinel, Long, Landau, & Pyszczynski, 2004; Yalom, 1980). We detail the validation of the Existential Isolation Scale and provide evidence of its convergent, discriminant, and criterion validities (Studies 1 and 2). In addition, we show that levels of existential isolation remain stable over a two-week period (Study 3), but also change as expected among those primed with the construct (Study 3). In the discussion, we review research that further establishes the uniqueness of this construct and its relevance to understanding the causes and consequences associated with social isolation more broadly construed.

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1. Introduction

"At times I think I'm the most alone man in existence. And...it has nothing to do with the presence of others – in fact, I hate others who rob me of my solitude and do not truly offer me company."

[When Nietzsche Wept (Yalom, 1992, p. 228)]

"L'enfer, c'est les autres." ("Hell is other people.")

[Huis Clos (Sartre, 1944, p. 93)]

Where would we be without others? Humans need the physical presence of other people for their continued existence. No venom pockets or poison darts came with the human design, no razor-sharp talons, no ability to change color to match our environment. Instead, humans survived over millions of years by grouping together and adopting a "strength in numbers" mentality (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969; Caporael & Brewer, 1995). With our very lives riding on these physical connections to others, how could anyone have the audacity to suggest that he would rather be alone than in the presence of others? How could any ingrate utter the unthinkable – even in a theatrical piece of fiction – that hell is other people?

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It turns out that, for a species endowed with complex cognitive abilities that include self-consciousness and the ability to ponder existential issues (Arndt & Vess, 2008; Goldenberg & Arndt, 2008; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Koole, & Solomon, 2010), there are multiple ways of being with others, or, put differently, multiple ways of being alone. In **Existential Psychotherapy**, Yalom (1980) documents three distinct, albeit intertwined forms of isolation: interpersonal, intrapersonal, and, the one with which we shall be concerned here, existential. Interpersonal isolation refers to the isolation stemming from lack of social contact with others. Thus, when inmates get placed in solitary confinement, when explorers find themselves alone in a remote part of the world, or when someone struggling to meet a deadline voluntarily holes herself up in her apartment for several consecutive days, interpersonal isolation will likely result.

In contrast to interpersonal isolation, intrapersonal isolation refers to isolated aspects within one's own psyche. This type of isolation can manifest itself in quite common symptoms such as indecisiveness, or feeling unsure of one's authentic wishes, desires, and interests, but can also appear at its most extreme in people with Dissociative Identity Disorder. When Deci and Ryan (2009) speak of self-determined individuals, they speak of individuals who have conquered the intrapersonal isolation that can sometimes result from behaving out of a desire to be loved, rather than out of intrinsic factors.

Although often comorbid with interpersonal and intrapersonal isolation, existential isolation stands apart from these other forms of isolation in theoretically meaningful ways. Yalom (1980) describes existential isolation as the unbridgeable gap between people, a gap that we often deny or cover up, but that can be felt most poignantly during key moments in life:

“No matter how close each of us becomes to another there remains a final unbridgeable gap; each of us enters existence alone and must depart from it alone. The existential conflict is thus, the tension between our awareness of our absolute isolation and our wish to be part of a larger whole (Yalom, 1980).”

Yalom focuses on what he argues is the reality of the human condition – the reality of existential isolation. From Yalom’s perspective, then, every human is existentially isolated. Although we agree that every human has the potential to experience existential isolation, here we focus specifically on the *feeling* of existential isolation. People feel existentially isolated when they feel alone in their experience, as though nobody else shares their experience or could come close to understanding it. One could argue that all people are indeed existentially isolated from one another (Yalom, 1980), insofar as subjective experience results from the filtering of any given stimulus through an individual’s sense organs and higher level cognitive apparatus and processes (Bruner, 1990). Practically, however, not all individuals experience this existential isolation and certainly not all people experience it all or even most of the time. Here we concentrate on these individual differences, which may stem from situational or dispositional causes.

1.1. What factors influence feelings of existential isolation?

Not all people walk around with heightened feelings of existential isolation. Some people erroneously assume that they share psychological states with significant others (Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002), or overestimate the number of people who share their beliefs and attitudes (i.e., the *false consensus effect*; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). Such thinking may keep existential isolation levels in check. Other strategies that may reduce existential isolation, and that people deploy with varying degrees of success, include seeking out confirmation for their belief systems (Landau et al., 2004; Swann, 1996) and even changing their own views to coincide with those of psychologically salient others (Asch, 1951; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Sinclair, Huntstinger, Skorinko, & Hardin, 2005).

What factors then, increase people’s levels of existential isolation? Feeling existentially isolated, we argue, results either from chronically or acutely (or both) having different subjective experiences from others. For instance, a young child who regularly follows all of her parents’ wishes and strives only to please them may develop dispositionally high levels of existential isolation to the extent that her parents deny her goodness and call her incorrigible and mischievous throughout her childhood. She may feel “alone in her experience,” as though no one truly understands her own private experience of herself (which is that she is a good kid!).

One need not experience a lifetime of misunderstanding to experience existential isolation, however. For example, a gay man may experience an acute case of existential isolation in the context of a heterosexual wedding where romantic connections of the heterosexual kind dominate the conversation. He may feel as though his conception of romantic connection and partnership shares no common ground with the prevailing, heterosexual conceptions being expressed. In contrast, those forming part of the dominant social reality of the occasion would feel low in existential isolation, presumably because of the surplus of seemingly like-minded others.

1.2. Why researchers should isolate existential isolation

Existential isolation can rattle people’s psychological equanimity (Pinel, Long, Landau, & Pyszczynski, 2004; Yalom, 1980) and thus could very well contribute to the negative consequences previously chalked up to social isolation more broadly construed. Drawing inspiration from Yalom (1980), as well as from research and theorizing on the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Swann & Bosson, 2010), Pinel et al. (2004) and Pinel, Long, Landau, Alexander, and

Pyszczynski (2006) note that existential isolation poses challenges to the needs for belief validation and connectedness that sustain people psychologically and that fill their lives with a sense of meaning. As beings who construct reality socially (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Echterhoff et al., 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Swann & Bosson, 2010), we rely on others to confirm our conceptions of reality. If others cannot access our conceptions of reality, however (and if we cannot access theirs), this whole process gets called into question and we find ourselves in a meaningless abyss (Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008; Landau et al., 2004; Swann, 1996).

The feelings of safety and protection that stem from our social connections with others (e.g., Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003) also diminish when feelings of existential isolation loom large. Feeling misunderstood and feeling connected are antithetical (Murray et al., 2002; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). As a whole, then, prolonged and enduring feelings of existential isolation can threaten our needs for belief validation and belonging, thus rendering us vulnerable to feelings of meaninglessness, social influence, poor judgment, and negative self-feelings (Costello & Long, 2014; Pinel, Long, & Crimin, 2010).

The potential mental health consequences of existential isolation give us reason enough to study it empirically. That said, existential isolation could have significant and deleterious interpersonal consequences as well, consequences that add to the need to distinguish it from other forms of isolation. Existential isolation is a form of social isolation insofar as feeling existentially isolated hinges on the existence of other people who (we presume) have different subjective experiences from our own. Moreover, we know from correlational and experimental research that social isolation takes an enormous toll on individuals and communities. Social isolation causes drops in well-being (Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004), and increases hostile cognitions (DeWall, Twenge, Gitter, & Baumeister, 2009) and outward displays of aggression (Gaertner, Iuzzini, & O’Mara, 2008). Social isolation predicts suicide attempts (Gini & Espelage, 2014), is implicated in homicide (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003; Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006), and correlates with depression (Cacioppo, Hawkley, & Thisted, 2010) and both internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors (Hymel, Rubin, Rowden, & LeMare, 1990).

We maintain that research uncovering the nefarious consequences of social isolation – broadly construed – calls for a more nuanced study of it. Yet to date, empirical work on social isolation does not tease existential isolation apart from interpersonal isolation. Despite knowing, then, that social isolation has negative effects, we do not currently have a way of determining which form of social isolation accounts for these effects. Having a validated measure of existential isolation could thus help advance our understanding of the effects of social isolation.

1.3. The present research

For both theoretical and empirical reasons, scholars of mental health and of interpersonal processes may want to consider the role that existential isolation plays in their research. The studies reported in this manuscript detail the validation of a measure that would allow them to do so. Studies 1 and 2 report on the development of the Existential Isolation Scale, as well as on its convergent, discriminant, and criterion validities. Study 3 asks whether a situational manipulation of existential isolation increases scores on the Existential Isolation Scale as well as whether scores on the Existential Isolation Scale remain stable over a 2-week period.

2. Study one: development of the Existential Isolation Scale

2.1. Method

In Study 1 we aimed to develop an internally consistent measure of existential isolation. Following classic scale validation procedure, we began with a large pool of possible items, with the goal of extracting

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