# Interpersonal and Existential Varieties of Isolation and Connection

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# Highlights

- There are two broad types of isolation: interpersonal and existential.
- Interpersonal isolation consists of objective loneliness and/or subjective loneliness.
- Existential isolation, as studied, is always subjective: it refers to feeling alone in one's own internal experience, or feeling as though no one else understands or shares it.
- Existential isolation has important implications – distinct from those of Interpersonal Isolation – for the individual, their relationships, and society.
- Distinguishing between existential and interpersonal isolation will provide a deeper understanding of psychological, interpersonal, and societal outcomes, as well as how to address them.

SOCIAL BUBBLE
P R O J E C T

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What do most people think of when they think of what it means to feel isolated from others?  Do they think of objective, physical isolation from others, such as when one spends a significant chunk of time completely alone and without any person-to-person contact?  Do they think of subjective feelings of loneliness, which may or may not coincide with being alone?  Or, do they think of isolation of an existential variety, one that centers around an unbridgeable gap between one's own experience of reality and other people's experience of that same "reality"?

Until recently, the empirical, psychological literature on social isolation focused primarily on the first two options (objective and subjective isolation), with very little attention given to the last one.  Yet as indicated by the vivid experience described above, in which a child felt completely misunderstood by their own father, sometimes the people who make us feel the most socially connected on one level (e.g., our family members) can make us feel the most isolated on another.

Consider a couple of other examples.  One veteran, describing an experience of isolation, writes: *"When I was deployed and then came home, I felt no one understood the situations I had encountered. I feel a lot of people thought it wasn't as bad as I made it out to be or that I exaggerated my experience there."*  One gay male shares: *"Before I came out to any of my closest friends and family, I would often feel...isolated from most of my straight friends, counterparts, and family.  It was hard to be a gay male and live emotionally isolated, and trying to deal with my own internal conflict while not feeling comfortable talking with anyone about it."*  These two examples put the spotlight on a form of isolation that, although social in nature differs from objective and subjective loneliness.  In keeping with Yalom's (1980) taxonomy, we refer to these different varieties of isolation as interpersonal isolation on the one hand, and existential isolation on the other.

# Key Terms

**Interpersonal Isolation (n)** consists of two types of loneliness:
- **Objective Loneliness (n):** Refers to infrequent interactions with other people, such as when one is physically isolated, lives alone, or lacks people with which to share moments in life.
- **Subjective loneliness (n):** Refers to a *feeling* of being alone and lacking meaningful interpersonal connections, irrespective of levels of objective loneliness.

**Existential Isolation (n):** The fundamental separation that exists between one individual and another with regard to internal experience.  As measured, refers to a *feeling* of being alone in one's in-the-moment, internal experience, as though no one understands or shares firsthand our personal experience.

## Existential Isolation

Interpersonal isolation, as we have suggested, generally stems from one of two sets of conditions.  People can feel interpersonally isolated when they have spent a significant chunk of time in the absence of others (what people typically call "objective loneliness"); they can also feel this way when they have a lack of relationships characterized by mutual concern, mostly positive interactions, and longevity (what people typically call "subjective loneliness").

Although feelings of existential isolation correlate with feelings of interpersonal isolation (i.e., subjective and objective loneliness), it differs from this variety of isolation in theoretically and psychologically meaningful ways.  Existential isolation refers to a "separation between the individual and the world;" an "unbridgeable gulf between oneself and any other human being." No matter what we experience, we experience through our own sense organs and higher level cognitive apparati and processes (Mueller, 1834/1912).  We cannot trade these "doors of perception" (Huxley, 1954) with another person and so we are locked inside our own experience, if you will, unable to know intimately, and firsthand, the experience of the other.

Although the phenomenon of existential isolation shows up in some of the earliest written texts (e.g., *The Bhagavad Gita;* Hawley, 2011), up until recently, the empirical psychological literature on social isolation, ostracism, loneliness, and social rejection did not explicitly address existential isolation or consider it as a distinct form of social

isolation.  Our lab embarked on an effort to rectify this, first by developing the now well-validated Existential Isolation Scale (Pinel et al., 2017), and then by delving into the unique psychological and interpersonal implications of this particular variety of isolation.

*I was living in an apartment complex...in a bad part of town. I didn't know my neighbors, and I was too old and disabled to get along with the students who lived around me. I'd stopped going to my job... because it was making me more ill to spend all day calling strangers, introducing myself, asking for help, and frequently being abused verbally for it. I had no romantic partner. My family was 1700 miles away, and I only spoke to my parents on a biweekly basis. I would sometimes go all week without interacting in person with anyone.*

**-Anonymous Research Participant, describing a moment of Interpersonal Isolation**

The Existential Isolation Scale allows researchers to examine this form of isolation as an individual difference variable that varies not only across people and but also across situations (Helm et al., 2019; Pinel et al., 2004; Pinel et al., 2017; Pinel, 2018).  Although some might disagree with the perspective that humans are existentially isolated by nature, few would deny that some humans experience this form of isolation more often and more saliently than others.

What makes feelings of existential isolation salient?  One clear contributor would involve repeated moments of experiencing stimuli differently from other people.  Dispositionally high levels of existential isolation might, for example, germinate in a young kid who has a fear of tickling, or a dislike for sarcasm, that their parents just can't understand or respect.  That same child could grow up to recognize frequent occurrences of reacting more seriously to stimuli that other people consider quite innocuous and humorous.  Situationally high levels of existential isolation could crop up, for example, around the dinner table, when the only vegan in the room has a very different reaction to the whole roasted fish on everyone else's plates but theirs.

# Intrapsychic and Interpersonal Psychological Implications of Existential Isolation

Existential isolation has significant implications for a species that relies on its members for the meeting of the basic psychological needs for belief validation (i.e., *epistemic needs*) and belonging/connection (i.e., *affiliative needs;* Echterhoff et al., 2009). Take epistemic needs, for example. Many scholars adhere to the perspective that reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Cooley, 1902; James, 1890; Mead, 1934; Pyszczynski et al., 2010; Swann & Bosson, 2010). As such, humans feel confident in their interpretations of reality, and thus experience met epistemic needs to the extent that they receive validation for these interpretations. It is hard to receive validation for interpretations that others cannot access however. In this way, existential isolation leaves people vulnerable to doubts about what is real and what is a product of their own mind (Pinel et al., 2004).

Existential isolation also makes the meeting of people's affiliative needs rather challenging. Even a short-lived interaction with a close relationship partner who makes us feel existentially isolated can shake our feelings of connectedness to them. We stop feeling close to that person when we come face to face with the recognition that they cannot know us intimately, at the level of experience. From this perspective, it makes sense that the relationship between the young person in the example and their father changed dramatically after the day he accused them of something they did not do.

Consistent with the hypothesized threat it poses to fundamental psychological needs, research indicates that scores on the existential isolation scale predict a variety of psychological outcomes, even after controlling for interpersonal isolation. For example, after controlling for interpersonal isolation, existential isolation continues to predict heightened depression, anxiety, and stress (Long et al., 2021); and greater liking for people with whom one *I-shares* (i.e., people with whom one seemingly shares in-the-moment subjective experience; Pinel et al, 2004; 2006). Also consistent with theory, members of groups that society tends to disregard, disrespect, or overlook (e.g., BIPOC individuals; non-native English speakers) have higher levels of existential isolation, on average, than members of societally normative groups (Pinel et al., 2021). More recently, we observed that Black individuals who have experience with racially motivated police mistreatment exhibit high levels of existential isolation and, disturbingly, these high levels of existential isolation predict suicidal ideation (Oleskowicz et al., 2021).

# Addressing Existential Isolation

Knowing that existential isolation has several negative implications for people's psychological well-being, we have also concentrated our research efforts on how to address feelings of existential isolation. Our research follows the logic that experiencing the opposite of existential isolation – existential connection – might at least temporarily assuage feelings of existential isolation. In fact, we have argued that moments that make people feel existentially connected have a unique allure and potency, precisely because of people's existential isolation.

When people believe they have had an I-sharing experience, they believe that they and at least one other person had the same in-the-moment experience of reality. They may have laughed at the same joke, or finished one another's sentences, or shared tears of the loss of a loved one. We call these experiences "I-sharing" experiences, because of the distinction made by William James (1890) and others between the two components of the self: The ME and the I. The ME, or self-as-object, refers to our description and evaluation of self when we reflect on it. If we were to look in a mirror, the reflection in the mirror would represent the ME. The I, or self-as-object, refers to our moment-to-moment experience of stimuli; the I shifts as our experience shifts, leaving a "stream of consciousness" in its wake. I-sharing, thus, refers to moments when we believe we have the same I, and thus the same in-the-moment, phenomenological experience as another person.

In experiments on I-sharing, we manipulate feelings of I-sharing (for example, we convince participants that they and an interaction partner either do or do react identically to a series of inkblots), and we measure the effects of these manipulations on people's liking for others (including outgroup members) and prosocial behaviors. We find that I-sharing promotes liking at the interpersonal and intergroup levels, that it reduces conformity in Asch's line-matching paradigm (Pinel et al., 2010), and that it increases helping and giving. Consistent with theory, people high in existential isolation show an especial liking for people with whom they I-share. This latter finding suggests that one might try to help people suffering from high levels of existential isolation by helping them to create opportunities for moments of shared, subjective experience. More research will need to be done to determine the practicality and effectiveness of such a strategy.

A separate and perhaps more effective method for addressing acute or chronic feelings of existential isolation might involve a regular meditation practice. In two separate studies, we observed that people who had undergone a 7-day mindfulness meditation intervention showed drops in existential isolation (but not interpersonal isolation) from

before the intervention to after.  A separate group of people who went on a week-long vacation showed no such drop in existential isolation.  We need more research on the topic as well as the mechanism, but we suspect that meditation addresses feelings of existential isolation both because it can help to dilute the perceived boundary between the self and other and because it puts the spotlight on the transient nature of subjective experience.  As people increasingly accept the notion of impermanence, perhaps those short-lived moments when we fail to I-share with others will not carry the same weight.

Research on existential isolation highlights its distinction from interpersonal isolation, as well as the unique role that it plays in psychological and interpersonal well-being.  Still, this work has only just begun.  As more and more people recognize the profound importance of social connection for the good, not just of the individual, but also for society as a whole, my colleagues and I hope that researchers will pay close attention to both varieties of isolation and connection.  We need to help people feel interpersonally connected to others and to forge relationships with those on whom they can count, but equally important, we need to help those who feel imprisoned within their own experience, unable to break free long enough to breathe in a moment of deep, existential connectedness.
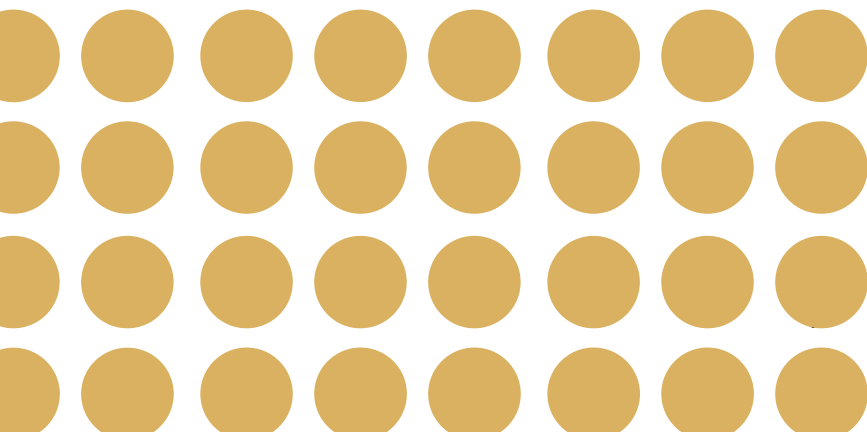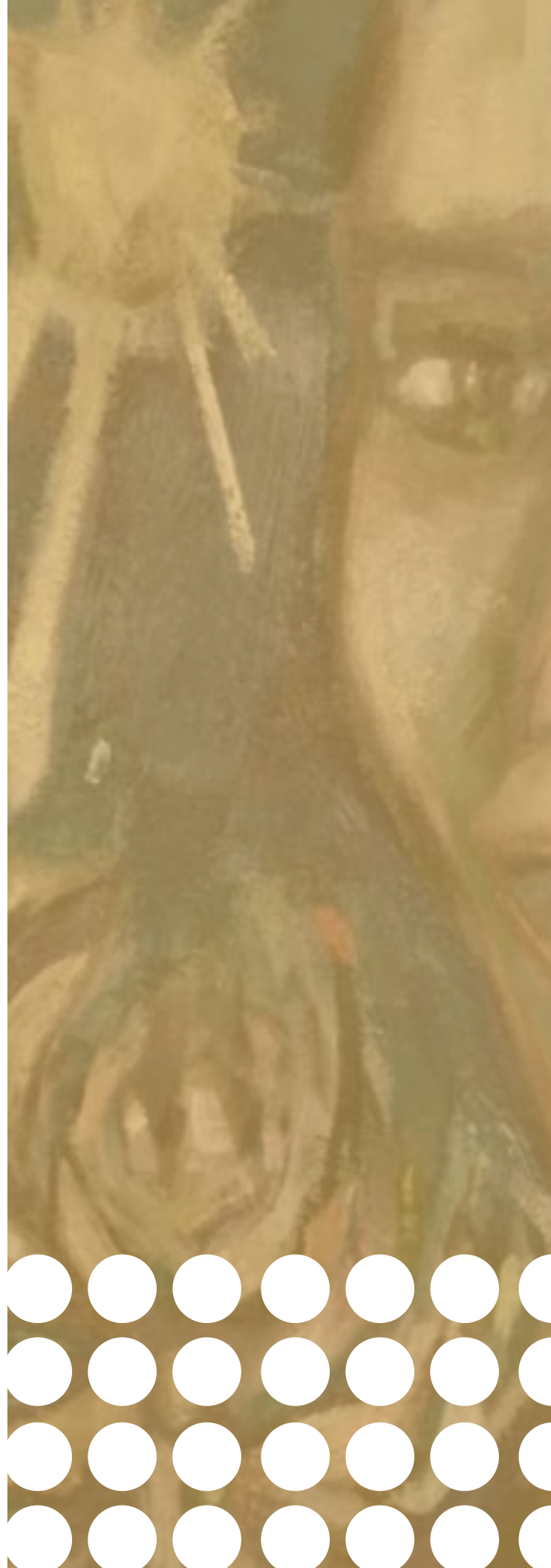
# Summary

- Social Isolation/Loneliness falls into two broad and distinct categories: interpersonal and existential.
- Interpersonal isolation consists of objective loneliness or subjective loneliness.
- Existential isolation, as studied, is always subjective: it feeling alone in one's own experience, or feeling as though no one else understands or shares one's experience.
- Existential isolation has important implications – distinct from those of Interpersonal Isolation – for the individual, their relationships, and society.
- Distinguishing between existential and interpersonal isolation will provide a deeper understanding of psychological, interpersonal, and societal outcomes, as well as how to address them.
- I-sharing and meditation may help to address feelings of existential isolation.

## Suggested Citation

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