Personality and Individual Differences 134 (2018) 283–288

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Explaining sex differences in existential isolation research

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Existential isolation
Sex differences
Loneliness
Communal and agentic values

ABSTRACT

Existential isolation (EI) is the subjective experience of feeling fundamentally separate from other human beings. Recent studies examining EI have observed a consistent sex difference wherein men report higher levels of EI than women. Our first study used a large undergraduate survey. It replicated the sex difference in EI and showed that controlling for loneliness and self-esteem did not account for this difference. Study 2 replicated this pattern using an online sample, and tested the hypothesis that this difference may be mediated by the sex difference in endorsement of communal and agentic values. We found that sex differences in endorsement of communal (but not agentic) values mediated the sex difference in EI. However, agentic value endorsement played no role. These findings indicate that men may be higher in existential isolation because they do not endorse communal values as much as women do. This suggests that one way to reduce the disproportionate experience of EI among men may be to increase their endorsement of communal values.

1. Introduction

Only a small handful of studies have begun to examine the construct of existential isolation (EI; Yalom, 1980). However, what has been published has observed a consistent sex difference between men and women regarding their relative levels of EI with men consistently scoring higher than women. However, to date, no research has attempted to explain why men and women report differing levels of existential isolation. In the following sections, we first define the construct of EI and highlight previous findings regarding EI in men and women. We then present a possible explanation of this difference and present two studies that replicate the effect and test for possible explanations. Since EI research has only been conducted in a limited number of samples, we felt it was necessary to first replicate the general finding before extrapolating and identifying a possible mechanism.

1.1. Existential isolation

Yalom (1980) defines existential isolation as the "unbridgeable gulf between oneself and any other being" (p. 355). Since humans are unable to experience the world through another person's sensory organs and each person has a rich web of personal experiences from which he or she experiences reality, all humans are inherently existentially isolated from one another. This concept has been discussed in philosophical and psychoanalytic circles (e.g., Yalom, 1980; Rank, 1945; Fromm, 1941) but has only recently been operationalized by empirical psychologists (e.g., Pinel, Long, Landau, & Pyszczynski, 2004; Pinel, Long, Murdoch, & Helm, 2017).

Pinel et al. (2017) created and validated the Existential Isolation Scale to measure trait feelings of EI. In this work the researchers differentiated the construct of EI from possible related constructs such as loneliness, need to belong, introversion, and alienation. Following Yalom (1980), these researchers defined feelings of EI as the subjective sense that one has a unique perspective that others are unable to validate or understand. For example, participants indicate their level of agreement with statements such as "I usually feel like people share my outlook on life" (reverse coded). Feelings of EI can be contrasted with feelings of social isolation, or loneliness, which refer to the subjective sense that one has fewer connections than desired (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980), and with objective isolation, which refers to the objective condition of having few contacts with others (Cacioppo, Fowler, & Christakis, 2009; Townsend, 1968).

By differentiating the terms EI, loneliness, and objective isolation, we are not arguing these are completely distinct and unrelated. We maintain that each type of isolation is a facet of interpersonal isolation. Indeed, Yalom (1980) notes that the boundaries between EI and other forms of interpersonal isolation (i.e., loneliness) are "semipermeable" and that experiences of one type of isolation can lead to feelings of another, and vice versa. Likewise, research in loneliness acknowledges that loneliness is a "complex set of feelings that occurs when intimate and social needs are not adequately met" (Cacioppo et al., 2006). Thus, it is likely that EI and loneliness are often conflated in research. For example, a commonly used loneliness scale, the UCLA Loneliness Scale version 3 (Russell, 1996) includes items such as "How often do you feel

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2018.06.032
Received 9 April 2018; Received in revised form 15 June 2018; Accepted 18 June 2018

that you are 'in tune' with the people around you?" and "How often do you feel that there are people who really understand you?" which clearly appears to relate more to existential isolation than to feeling as though one has fewer social connections than desired.

The causes and consequences of EI and loneliness should also differ. The consequences of loneliness have been well documented. For example, loneliness predicts higher mortality (Caspi, Harrington, Moffitt, Milne, & Poulton, 2006), greater cardiovascular risk (Hawkley, Masi, Berry, & Cacioppo, 2006), personality disorders (Richman & Sokolove, 1992), depressive symptoms (Cacioppo, Hughes, Waite, Hawkley, & Thisted, 2006), and more (for a review, see Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010).

In contrast, to loneliness, which has been extensively studied for decades, research in EI is only beginning. However, Pinel, Bernecker, and Rampy (2015) argue that EI particularly threatens human needs for belief validation (Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008), meaning (Baumeister, 1991), prediction (Seligman & Maier, 1967), and control (Langer & Rodin, 1976) because humans rely on one another to validate our subjective experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Cornwell, Franks, & Higgins, 2017). Evidence has found that although correlated with each other, loneliness and EI have been shown to relate quite differently to the Big Five and other personality constructs. For example, Pinel et al. (2017) found that loneliness was positively correlated with the need to belong while EI was uncorrelated with the construct. Additionally while EI was only moderately correlated with alienation, $r = 0.32$, loneliness was strongly correlated with alienation, $r = 0.78$ (Pinel et al., 2017). However, additional research is needed to continue to unpack and understand the differences between these constructs.

1.2. A sex difference observed in EI research

One interesting pattern of results that has emerged in EI research is that men consistently score higher than women on the EI scale. In the scale validation paper, Pinel et al. (2017) found that men reported significantly higher EI than women, $d = 0.34$. Costello (2017) replicated this finding and found that again men reported significantly higher EI than women, $d = 0.32$.

In contrast to EI research, literature on sex differences in loneliness tends to be inconsistent (Borys & Perlman, 1985; Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016; Pinquart & Sörensen, 2001; Schultz & Moore, 1986) and appears to vary as a function of measurement. In general, women tend to report greater loneliness when single-item measures are used while men tend to report higher loneliness when multi-item measures are used (e.g., the UCLA Loneliness Scale).

Research on sex differences in objective isolation often depends on age and family size (e.g., Dunbar & Spoors, 1995) and tends to find that men and women often have similarly sized social networks (Dunbar & Spoors, 1995) but that each sex tends to have a higher proportion of same sex members in their network than opposite sex (Roberts, Wilson, Fedurek, & Dunbar, 2008). Although historically women tended to have a higher proportion of kin in their social networks than men, and men tended to have a higher proportion of non-kin in their social networks than women (e.g., Moore, 1990), recent studies have found these gender discrepancies to be diminishing (e.g., McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006).

Notably, whereas research on sex differences in loneliness has been inconsistent and sex differences in objective isolation are minimal, research regarding EI has consistently found a sex difference. Of course EI research is relatively new compared to the expansive literatures examining social and objective isolation.

Pinel et al. (2017) speculated that stereotypes and gender roles might explain these differences. However, to date, no research has been conducted to test these speculations. Work exploring gender roles has found that western culture dictates that males are encouraged to be agentic, independent, and emotionally distant while females are encouraged to be more nurturing, passive, and emotionally in-tune with others (e.g., Durik et al., 2006; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). Additionally, research has found that men have lower emotional contagion than women (Costello & Long, 2014), which may result from social pressure for men to be more emotionally distant than women (Simon & Nath, 2004).

These socialization processes may lead men to discuss their inner states less often than women do, which may lead to a greater sense that others are unable to understand their experiences (i.e., to feel EI). Although socialization processes themselves are difficult to capture, a body of research has found that socialization impacts the degree to which men and women endorse agentic and communal values. In particular, men tend to endorse more agentic values while women tend to endorse more communal values. We review that literature next.

1.3. Sex differences in value endorsement

As Pinel et al. (2017) speculated, one reason for the difference in EI between men and women may lie in differences in the socialization of men and women in our society. According to Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), sex differences are largely the result a long history of differential role distribution of the sexes. In other words, the various roles men and women have taken on historically (for both evolutionary and social reasons) have become the basis for stereotypes attributed to each gender in our modern world.

Much research has shown that agentic values are stereotypically defined as 'masculine' (e.g. assertive, independent, achievement-oriented, self-efficient), whereas communal values are defined as more 'feminine' (e.g. warm, affectionate, others-oriented, kind; Bakan, 1966; Eagly, 1987; Twenge, 1997; Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012; Castillo-Mayén & Montes-Berges, 2014; Durik et al., 2006; Fiske, 1998; Fiske et al., 2007). However, in recent decades there has been an increase in females who self-identify as more agentic, sometimes to the point of showing no differences in self-identification on this value compared with men (Diekman & Eagly, 2000; Twenge, 1997, 2001). Some attribute this to increasing female representation in the workplace, which in turn leads to an increased sense of agency and independence (e.g. Rudman & Glick, 2001). By taking on 'non-traditional' roles for women, women may endorse more agentic values providing evidence for social role theory: the more one is assigned to a specific role, the more they will adapt to fit said role. Yet despite this increase in agency, women simultaneously continue to self-endorse communal values more than men, and often rate themselves lower on agentic values than men (Spence & Buckner, 2000), demonstrating how resistant to change these stereotypes are.

Sex differences in agentic and communal values may help to explain sex differences in self-reported EI. As mentioned above, agentic values tend to be associated with independence and self-reliance, which may lead an individual to see themselves as separate from others. In contrast, communal values tend to be associated with interdependence and group-orientation, which may lead an individual to see themselves as interconnected with others. Those who are more group-oriented should report lower EI than those who are more self-oriented. Thus, the extent to which men and women report differences in agentic and communal value endorsement may help explain sex differences in EI.

1.4. Overview of present research

The present studies seek to offer an explanation for the sex differences observed in previous EI research. Since EI has only been empirically studied at a limited number of locations and only a limited number of times, we first conducted Study 1 with a large undergraduate sample in order to replicate previous findings that men and women differ in their self-reported EI. Study 2 was then conducted to test our primary hypothesis that sex differences in reported EI could be explained by differences in communal and agentic value endorsement. In