Lonely and excluded: A downward spiral? An investigation in Germany before the COVID-19 Pandemic

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1.1 Lonely and excluded: A downward spiral? An investigation in Germany before the COVID-19 pandemic

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Loneliness and the feeling of being excluded from society both arise from the unsatisfied need to belong, and these negative experiences tend to reinforce each other over time, Oliver Huxhold and Bianca Suanet note. The longer people feel lonely, the less they perceive themselves as valued members of society.

INTRODUCTION

Humans are an inherently social species. During early history, cooperation in small groups became the primary survival strategy in response to the many environmental hazards early humanity faced. It is probably for this reason that all members of our species share an ingrained need to be connected to others. This need to belong manifests itself as a tendency to constantly form and maintain reliable and meaningful social ties (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Generally speaking, people need a few close and trusted social relationships, as well as a larger group of friends and acquaintances with whom they can pursue social activities (Cacioppo et al., 2015). If these social needs are not met, socially deprived individuals may feel lonely. Chronic loneliness has been shown to lead to serious mental and physical health problems and may even permanently decrease ability to form and maintain social bonds (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). We argue that loneliness may even damage individuals' sense of belonging to the society they live in.

Sociologists have argued for a long time that to satisfy the need to belong, people not only need to have meaningful relationships: they also need to perceive themselves as being part of society and able to participate in societally valued activities. In classic sociological work, Durkheim (1893 [1965]) postulated that with the increasing division of labor in the process of early modernization, solidarity in a society changed. It became

progressively less based on concrete personal and community relationships – such as family ties – and increasingly dependent on each individual's abstract contribution to society. As a consequence, when people today perceive themselves as socially excluded – meaning that they do not feel sufficiently able to participate in activities that bind them to their societies – their sense of societal solidarity is threatened and they may feel estranged from their immediate social environment (Abrutyn, 2019). In line with this, some studies have shown that people who perceive themselves as socially excluded tend to exhibit low subjective well-being. In addition, the perception of social exclusion can act as a self-fulfilling prophecy, barring people from even the few opportunities for social participation that are available to them (Hommerich, 2015).

The current study

In a recent study (Huxhold et al., 2022), we hypothesized that loneliness and perceived social exclusion are distinct but related phenomena, because both express violations of the individual's need to belong. First, we assumed that loneliness and perceived social exclusion share a common set of risk factors, albeit to a different degree, as loneliness refers to the need to have a satisfying network and social exclusion to the need to belong at the societal level. Second, assuming that people get strong cues about their worth in society from their social relationships, we hypothesized that experiences of loneliness – indicating a lack of social relationships in terms of quantity or quality – may lead over time to the perception of being excluded from society as a whole.

Methods and results

To test our hypotheses, we used data from a survey of 6,002 adults aged 40–85 living in private households in Germany. Two assessment waves conducted three years apart, in 2014 and 2017, respectively, were included in the analysis. We employed cross-sectional and longitudinal structure equation models to account for measurement error and sample selectivity.

Our analyses indeed revealed a relatively strong correlation between loneliness and perceived social exclusion ($r = 0.56$). Lonelier people were more likely to perceive themselves as excluded from society and vice versa. This finding supported our assumption that both experiences are related at a fundamental level, since both may indicate a lack of belonging.

Moreover, further tests confirmed that experiences of loneliness and of perceived social exclusion can be caused by similar risk factors – such as socio-economic disadvantage or deficiencies in the social network. However, being poor and low-educated were more strongly associated with perceived social exclusion, whereas a lack of social support and high-quality social relationships was more strongly associated with loneliness.

Most importantly, we found that lonely people tend to feel more socially excluded over time. This aligns with the idea that people experience belonging to society partly through their integration in interpersonal social relationships, as suggested, for example, by Abrutyn (2019): not being successful in personal social interactions may give people the notion that they are not worthy members of society.

DISCUSSION

It is often argued that high incidence rates of loneliness may pose a threat to the social coherence of modern societies. To our knowledge, this is the first study that provides direct empirical support for this claim. We found that experiences of loneliness over time arouse a feeling of not being a valuable member of society. Furthermore, people who feel excluded from society tend to withdraw from social activities in general and volunteering activities in particular (Hommerich, 2015). Thus, in fostering a feeling of estrangement from society, loneliness may be particularly harmful for civic engagement.

Moreover, our findings are particularly relevant from the perspective of ongoing population ageing. Adults often feel more socially excluded after retiring from paid work (Wetzel & Mahne, 2016). In all European countries, the baby-boomers – the most numerous generation in history – will transit into retirement over the next few years. Providing them with a sustainable opportunity structure for active ageing, i.e. social and civic participation, will become a major challenge.

Governments could, for example, encourage volunteer organizations to recruit more older adults or could initiate campaigns to fight negative age stereotypes. Our advice based on the results of this study is that social policies and interventions against loneliness should focus more strongly on fostering community participation and social activities of older adults, as loneliness might spill over into decreased feelings of belonging to society, thereby damaging social trust and cohesion. In this regard, older adults with a lower socio-economic status should receive particular attention,

as they find themselves in a double jeopardy: they are more likely to be lonely and to feel socially excluded.

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