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Socially isolated, but not lonely in lockdown: Exploring the role of reflective functioning as a protective factor in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction: Loneliness is a pressing public mental health issue. So far, there has been a paucity of investigations focused on the individual differences modulating this subjective feeling in the face of difficult circumstances, e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the present study aimed to investigate the role of mentalization; given that the construct comprises reflection abilities that might be particularly relevant to the pandemic's interpersonal challenges.

Methods: A survey representative of the German population was conducted from May to June 2020 ($N = 2,503$). We examined mentalization, operationalized as reflective functioning (RF) and measured using the Mentalization Questionnaire (MZQ), both as a protective factor against loneliness on its own and as a moderator of the association of social isolation with loneliness.

Results: Of the overall sample, 822 (32.8%) individuals reported social isolation. Worse RF was moderately associated with higher levels of loneliness ($r = .433, p < .001$). A linear regression model (controlling for sociodemographic characteristics and general personality pathology) confirmed this positive association, but also indicated an interaction effect of RF and social isolation in the statistical prediction of loneliness. Stratified models showed that RF was a comparatively weaker statistical predictor of loneliness among the socially isolated.

Discussion: This representative population study expanded our knowledge about the factors shaping loneliness in the population. RF emerged as a potentially modifiable protective influence. Further research needs to clarify the mechanisms through which it mitigates loneliness.

Are you currently an Early Career Researcher?

Yes, I am within 6 years of receiving my Ph.D.

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