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COMMENTARY

What about the lonely? Bridging loneliness, pandemics, and I-O psychology

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The lack of discussion in Rudolph et al.'s (2021) article involving individuals' experiences of isolation, and more specifically loneliness, in response to COVID-19 is surprising. COVID-19 has amplified the already present conversation surrounding loneliness, which is defined as the negative affect experienced from a discrepancy in desired and actual relationships (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). For instance, reflecting on this issue, Banerjee and Rai (2020) state, "This COVID-19 pandemic seems to have brought our frenzied speed of modern society to a grinding halt and has literally crushed the wings of unlimited social interaction" (p. 2). However, somewhat surprisingly, recent empirical evidence seems to suggest that individuals' experiences of loneliness has *not* changed due to COVID-19 (Luchetti et al., 2020). This presents a significant opportunity and challenge for industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists.

As discussed by Rudolph et al. (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted individuals' boundaries between home and work life. Issues at home are now issues at work (e.g., your child participating in a video conference call), and struggles at work now easily flow into home life (e.g., the lack of a commute to "cool off" from a rough day at work). Because the COVID-19 pandemic, and more directly remote work, has blurred the boundaries between home and work life, struggles and difficulties now seamlessly drift between the two domains, with loneliness and its associated negative outcomes being far from an exception (Beutel et al., 2017; Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). However, because of this bridge between home and work life, I-O psychologists are uniquely positioned to contribute to this challenging and growing conversation involving loneliness and the COVID-19 pandemic. If we can better understand how loneliness functions during pandemics, we can leverage our understanding of the workplace to develop better organizational policies, practices, and procedures to not only combat loneliness in the workplace but also transfer the resulting benefits back into the individual's home life. Therefore, aligning with the vision of Rudolph et al.'s (2021) article, I offer some potential avenues by which I-O psychologists can seek to investigate loneliness within the context of pandemics.

Investigating loneliness within pandemics from an I-O psychology perspective

Loneliness is largely a cognitive process; it is based on the relational perceptions and expectations of an individual. COVID-19, as well as potential future pandemics, can have a significant influence on individuals' cognitive processing. This could be due to individual or societal (Rajkumar, 2020) stress and anxiety associated with direct (physical sickness) or indirect (economic) outcomes of a pandemic. Because of this disruption in cognitive processing, researchers should seek to investigate how pandemics influence individuals' relational expectations for coworkers and colleagues. This could provide an explanation for why loneliness has been reported to remain stable. For instance, although actual relationships could have changed due to remote work, so could have

individuals' expectations for relationships. Making such an investigation could provide valuable insight into understanding the connection between pandemics and how individuals approach and develop expectations for work relationships.

Additionally, loneliness research has focused almost exclusively on within-domain relationships. As a prominent example, Ozcelik and Barsade (2018) examined the relationship between workplace loneliness and job performance. Although a valuable line of research, the COVID-19 pandemic has eliminated domain boundaries for many individuals. Future research should seek to better incorporate the spillover literature (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000) with our understanding of loneliness. This could provide valuable insight into how discrepancies in desired and actual relationships at home, such as during a shelter-in-place order, might influence employee job performance. Alternatively, research could examine how organizations might combat loneliness remotely by creating digital initiatives to improve employee-to-employee relationships. Improved work relationships might subsequently then improve home outcomes.

As another potential avenue of future research, although Rudolph et al. (2021) mention technology competence, understanding how work relationships are maintained and developed during pandemics via technology is a notable undertaking for I-O psychologists and highly relevant within the loneliness context. For example, researchers could decompose loneliness into actual relationship evaluations and desired relational expectations and then determine how these two components of loneliness are influenced when individuals are restricted to digitally mediated communication. Although past research has examined loneliness and technology in older populations (e.g., Chopik, 2016), this area of research is still largely underdeveloped for individuals currently in the workforce and specifically within the pandemic context.

Finally, research has yet to explore how loneliness influences work outcomes over time, or how loneliness experienced during a specific period of life might have long-term ramifications in the workplace. Given the potential for sustained remote work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers should seek to examine how loneliness experienced during the pandemic might influence future work outcomes. Importantly, this avenue of research could also uncover moderators that buffer again the negative outcomes of loneliness and the transfer of these outcomes into the workplace. In this way, results could prove beneficial for preparing individuals who might be particularly susceptible to loneliness and for providing direction to organizations seeking to combat loneliness in their workforce during future pandemics.

With these potential avenues of research in mind, I encourage I-O psychologists to add loneliness to the list of notable organizational issues that are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given our understanding of how loneliness functions within pandemics is largely underdeveloped and underexplored, ample opportunity exists for I-O psychologists to enter the conversation on this significant global issue that has continued to gain attention as we take stock of the psychological and organizational fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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