**Feeling out of (existential) place: A cost of non-normativeness**

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Abstract

Non-normative status goes hand in hand with a range of negative consequences. Here we consider yet another consequence of non-normative status: *existential isolation* (i.e., the feeling of being alone in one’s experiences). Across Studies 1a and 1b, we found consistently higher trait levels of existential isolation (but not interpersonal isolation) among people with non-normative group status than among their normative counterparts. This effect appeared whether we looked at non-normativeness with regard to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, citizenship, native language, body weight, religious affiliation, or socioeconomic status. Study 2 goes on to examine one epistemic consequence of heightened existential isolation: uncertainty with regard to judgments of racism. Black participants with heightened levels of existential isolation expressed more uncertainty with regard to racism judgments than did those with lower levels of existential isolation. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed, including: testing potential mechanisms to explain the link between non-normative status and existential isolation, as well as further exploring the implications of heightened existential isolation among those with a non-normative status.

*Keywords:* existential isolation, social isolation, individual differences, intergroup relations

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A father and son have a car accident and are both badly hurt.

They are both taken to separate hospitals.

When the boy is taken in for an operation, the surgeon says:

“I cannot do the surgery because this is my son.”

How is this possible?

Most of you have probably heard this riddle and know the answer by now. If you were like some of the authors and most of their students, you felt stumped when you first heard it. You felt stumped because of the normative assumptions that the majority of the people living in the United States still hold: in this case, that surgeons are male. We come face to face with these assumptions upon hearing the riddle’s solution: the boy’s mother is the surgeon. (Interestingly, this too reflects a normative assumption of our society; another perfectly acceptable solution to this question – though not the normative one – would be that the boy has two fathers).

Typically, educators use this riddle to open the eyes of those with normative group memberships to the normative assumptions they make, and this opens the door to a lengthier discussion on what we know about the consequences of such assumptions for those with a non-normative status. Social psychologists have identified several such consequences, including limited conceptions of one’s own options in life (citations); feeling separate (Bosson, Weaver, & Prewitt-Freilino, 2012; Murphy, Steele, & Gross, 2007; Murphy & Zirkel, 2016) and depersonalized (citations); being stereotyped (Pinel, 1998; Brown & Pinel, 2000; Steele, 1995) and ignored (citations) and treated as invisible (citations). Each of these consequences can feed directly into yet another outcome that we concentrate on here and that has up until recently received little empirical attention: the outcome of existential isolation.

**Existential Isolation**

People experience stimuli through their own sense organs; at this juncture, we know no other way to do it (Pinel, Long, Landau, & Pyszczynski, 2004; Pinel, Long, Murdoch, & Helm, 2017; Pinel, 2018). People cannot literally borrow the olfactory or auditory system of the other to know what something sounds like or smells like to them. This state of affairs leaves people vulnerable to feelings of existential isolation, feelings of being alone in their phenomenological experience of reality. People who feel existentially isolated feel a fundamental disconnect between their experience of reality and that of those around them. They feel as though other people do not share their reactions to and interpretations of stimuli; they feel out of existential place.

Existential isolation stands apart from two other varieties of isolation – intrapersonal and interpersonal – which Yalom (1980) articulated so well in his treatise on Existential Psychotherapy. Whereas intrapersonal isolation refers to internal separation between aspects of an individual self (as when some people may choose to disregard, forget, or even disassociate from aspects of themselves), interpersonal isolation refers to a lack of meaningful connections with others. Interpersonal isolation can result when people have no one or even just a limited pool of people with whom they have ongoing relationships characterized by mutual care and concern.

Note that existential isolation differs from interpersonal isolation and people can report high levels of one but not the other. For instance, married couples celebrating their 50th anniversary have decades’ worth of interpersonal connection. However, they can still feel like strangers to one another when it comes to truly understanding each other’s passions, dreams, and day to day thoughts and feelings.

The empirical study of existential isolation began only recently, facilitated by the development and validation of the Existential Isolation Scale (Pinel, Long, Murdoch, & Helm, 2017). We now have data from several studies that distinguish existential isolation from various forms of interpersonal isolation, such as alienation, loneliness, and the need to belong (Long, Pinel, Park, Costello, & Daily, 2020; Park & Pinel, 2020; Pinel et al., 2017). Although indices of interpersonal isolation often correlate weakly to moderately with existential isolation, when controlling for the effects of interpersonal isolation, high levels of existential isolation predict a host of negative consequences, including: physical health impairments (Long et al., 2020); low self-esteem (Pinel et al., 2017); high levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Long et al., 2020; Sommer, Constantino, Goodwin, Coyne, & Pinel, 2018); aggressive tendencies (Yawger et al., 2018).

These findings pertain primarily to the dispositional (trait) form of existential isolation – the *chronic* feeling of aloneness in one’s experiences. Although existential isolation can also vary according to the situation (Helm, Greenberg, Park, & Pinel, 2018; Pinel et al., 2017; Pinel, Long, Landau, Alexander, & Pyszczynski, 2006), the current work also spotlights dispositional levels of existential isolation. Moreover, in Studies 1a and 1b we concentrate on group level differences in dispositional levels of existential isolation. Although certainly the individuals constituting any given non-normative group vary in their dispositional levels of existential isolation (something we examine in Study 2), we expect that groups considered non-normative in contemporary United States society will have higher levels of existential isolation, on average, than groups considered normative. We elaborate on our rationale for this prediction in the section that follows.

**Non-Normative Status and Existential Isolation**

Research shows that non-normative status often goes hand in hand with feelings of not belonging (Bosson, Weaver, & Prewitt-Freilino, 2012; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006; Murphy, Steele, & Gross, 2007; Murphy & Zirkel, 2016), which primarily tap into what Yalom (1980) and we refer to as interpersonal isolation. Here we ask whether it also goes hand in hand with feelings of existential isolation. Individuals with a non-normative status regularly encounter normative assumptions that make salient the difference between their own experience and the so-called “normative” one. When adults ask teenage girls if they have a boyfriend, or when they ask their kids’ friends what mom and dad do for a living, they communicate an expectation that teenage girls experience attraction for boys, or that their home life consists of a heteronormative partnership between a husband and a wife. Such communications can make people feel as though their experience not only differs from that of most others, but, perhaps worse, that their experience does not even exist as a possibility in the minds of others. Such communications bring to mind James’ (1890) well-known writing about the cruelest punishment being completely disregarded by others, as if one does not even exist at all. The existential equivalent of this happens on a regular basis to people with a non-normative status, as they walk through a world that completely overlooks the existence of their internal experience.

The current research tests the possibility that people with non-normative group status experience heightened levels of existential isolation (but not necessarily interpersonal isolation) relative to their normative counterparts. In Studies 1a and 1b, we compare the trait levels of existential isolation among those with a non-normative group membership to those with a normative group membership. We predicted that, across the board, non-normative status would be associated with higher levels of existential isolation would normative status. discrimination.

**Study 1a**

In Study 1a, we compared White participants to non-White participants, non-Hispanic to Hispanic participants, participants with a religious affiliation to those without a religious affiliation[[1]](#footnote-1), and heterosexual participants to participants identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. In Study 1b, we compared White participants to non-White participants, White/non-Hispanic to Hispanic participants, heterosexual to homosexual participants, religious to non-religious participants, native English speakers to non-native English speakers, U.S. citizens to foreigners living in the U.S., non-heavyweight participants to heavyweight participants, and high socioeconomic status (SES) participants to low SES participants. For each of these comparisons, we expected the average existential isolation level of the non-dominant group to be higher than that of the dominant group. We did not necessarily expect to see parallel differences in interpersonal isolation.

Although our participants varied with respect to gender, we did not expect men to have lower levels of existential isolation than women in either Study 1a or 1b. First, the dominant/non-dominant distinction gets harder to make when it comes to males and females because, unlike the other groupings we consider here, males and females generally rely on one another to perpetuate the species (Fiske & Stevens, 1993). Second, previous research on existential isolation reveals that, within the United States, men in fact exhibit higher levels of existential isolation than women (Helm et al., 2018; Park & Pinel, 2019; Pinel et al., 2017). Research also indicates that differences in self-construal and the endorsement of communal values account for these gender differences (Helm et al., 2018; Park & Pinel, 2019). For instance, Park and Pinel (2019) studied existential isolation in an individualistic culture (the United States) and in a collectivistic culture (South Korea). Whereas gender differences in existential isolation emerged in the individualistic culture, they did not emerge in the collectivistic one. Additionally, a within culture mediational analysis revealed that differences in interdependent self-construal mediated the effect of gender on existential isolation. Thus, although one could make a compelling case for the United States being a male-dominated culture, we would argue that male-female differences in existential isolation break from the hypothesized dominant/non-dominant pattern partly because the lives of men and women intersect more readily than the lives of other groups considered here, and partly because of the different socialization experienced by most males and females in the United States.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants for this study (N = 1,449) came from four separate samples of undergraduate psychology students and university staff recruited at two universities in the northeastern United States.[[2]](#footnote-2) Combining samples in this way allowed for the study of groups for which we generally do not have adequate sample size. We collected age data for 994 participants; of those, age ranged from 18 to 66 years old (*M* = 22.01). See Table 1 for full sample demographics along the dimensions of gender, ethnicity, race, citizenship/foreign student status, religious affiliation, and sexual orientation.

**Procedure**

Participants completed the measures discussed here as part of separate, larger studies. We combined them to have a large enough sample size to compare our groups of interest. Here we focus only on those variables relevant to our key question, i.e., whether members of dominant and non-dominant groups differ with regard to their levels of existential and interpersonal isolation. Specifically, we utilized participants’ self-reported demographic information with regard to ethnicity, race, citizenship/foreign student status, religious affiliation, and sexual orientation. In addition, we measured participants’ levels of existential and interpersonal isolation via self-report questionnaires.

**Demographic variables**. Participants reported their ethnicity, race, citizenship/foreign student status, religious affiliation, and sexual orientation (see Table 1). Given small numbers of participants identifying with certain racial groups, we reduced the data into meaningful chunks by creating a “non-White” composite group (collapsing across all racial groups other than White; *n* = 145)[[3]](#footnote-3).

**Existential isolation.** We used Pinel et al.’s (2017) Existential Isolation Scale to measure existential isolation. This scale consists of six items asking participants to rate the extent to which they agree with items such as “I often have the same reactions to things as other people around me do” (reverse-coded) and “People do not often share my perspective.” Participants typically respond using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree); here, we used standardized scores because these data came from multiple studies, across which the actual response scales varied slightly. The Existential Isolation Scale demonstrates high internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha of .86 to .91) and has been validated extensively (Pinel et al., 2017).

**Interpersonal isolation.** Of our 1,449 participants, 1,050 also completed the Need to Belong Scale (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2007): a 10-item measure of the need to belong, a construct closely related to interpersonal isolation. Sample items include: “I would not like to be alone;” “Being apart from my friends for long periods of time would not bother me” (reverse-coded); and “It would bother me a great deal if I were not included in other people’s plans.” This measure typically utilizes a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree); however, as with the Existential Isolation Scale, we used standardized scores here to account for slightly different response scales across studies.

**Results**

We provide the average existential isolation and need to belong Z-scores for each of our groups in Table 2. We conducted a series of ANOVAs to test the observed group differences, and found that non-dominant group members consistently reported significantly higher levels of existential isolation than their dominant counterparts. This is true whether we compare the existential isolation scores of *non-White* participants to those of *White* participants, *F*(1, 1275) = 4.60, *p* = .037, *d* = .21, *Hispanic* to *non-Hispanic* participants, *F*(1, 1330) = 3.72, *p* = .05, *d* = .28, *non-religious* to *religious* participants, *F*(1, 901) = 18.53, *p* < .001, *d* = .39, or those who identify as *gay, lesbian, or bisexual* to those who identify as *heterosexual*, *F*(1, 342) = 2.97, *p* = .086, *d* = .45 (although this latter difference falls outside the traditional level of statistical significance, we deemed it worth noting due to its consistent pattern and large effect size). Although not statistically significant because of the small sample size (*p* = .29), the trend for *non-citizens (foreign students)* versus *citizens (U.S. students)* followed the same pattern, *d* = .25[[4]](#footnote-4).

Importantly, in all cases, the need to belong either did not differ across the groups compared or it tended to be higher for the dominant (and thus *less* existentially isolated) group. Specifically, need to belong did not differ between *religious* and *not religious* participants (*p* = .705), nor between *non-citizens (foreign students)* and *citizens (U.S. students*; *p* = .732). Notable differences emerged only when we looked at the need to belong z-scores of *non-White* participants compared to those of *White* participants, *F*(1, 1033) = 6.21, *p* = .013, *d* = .26, *Hispanic* to *non-Hispanic* participants, *F*(1, 1036) = 3.99, *p* = .046, *d* = .39, and participants who identify as *gay, lesbian, or bisexual* to those who identify as *heterosexual*, *F*(1, 340) = 3.15, *p* = .077, *d* = .57. Again, however, these differences in interpersonal isolation, although some statistically significant, were in the opposite direction of the differences observed with regard to existential isolation.

**Study 1b**

In Study 1a, we found support for our hypothesis that members of non-dominant groups exhibit higher levels of existential isolation than members of dominant groups. We observed this difference along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation. Study 1b builds upon these findings in a few ways. First, we replicate these results with a larger and more diverse sample, addressing the small non-dominant group sizes for some of our comparisons in Study 1a. Second, we examine an expanded set of group dimensions; in addition to those also considered in Study 1a (race, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and foreign student status), we add three new dimensions (native language, heavyweight status, and socioeconomic status), thus allowing us to probe further the generalizability of Study 1a’s findings. Third, we used an alternate measure of interpersonal isolation: loneliness.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants for this study were 1,778 undergraduate psychology students at a university in the southwestern United States, who ranged in age from 18 to 36 years old (*M* = 18.68, *SD* = 1.42). See Table 3 for full sample demographics along the dimensions of gender, race/ethnicity, citizenship/foreign student status, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, native language, heavyweight status, and socioeconomic status.

**Procedure**

Participants completed the measures discussed here as part of a separate, larger study on student attitudes and preferences. Participants completed the survey voluntarily during class and received partial credit toward their research requirement. Here we focus only on those variables relevant to our research question, i.e., whether members of dominant and non-dominant groups differ with regard to their levels of existential isolation. Specifically, we measured participants’ identification with regard to race/ethnicity, citizenship/foreign student status, native language, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, heavyweight status, and social class. We also measured participants’ levels of existential and interpersonal isolation.

**Demographic variables**. Participants reported their race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, citizenship/foreign student status, English language nativity, and subjective socioeconomic status (see Table 3). We also asked participants to self-report their height and weight, which we used to calculate their BMI and determine their weight classification; heavyweight status was defined as having a BMI greater than 25 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016).

Because, even with this larger and more diverse sample, we still had relatively small numbers of respondents in several categories, we needed to create a series of groups collapsing across them. First, we created a group to represent our White participants, reflecting European-Americans, Jewish-Americans, and those who identified as “Other” but then indicated “White” as their race (*n* = 860). Importantly, this constitutes a White and non-Hispanic group, as participants who reported being both “White” (as defined here) and “Hispanic” were omitted from this composite. Next, because most of our non-White racial groups were too small in number for adequate power (all except “Hispanic,” *n* = 379), we collapsed across all other reporting groups to create a “non-White” group (*n* = 751). We followed a similar procedure for sexual orientation (creating a “lesbian/gay/bisexual/other (LGB)” group, *n* = 96) and religious affiliation (creating a “non-religious” group, representing all participants who either responded as Agnostic or Atheist or who selected Other and then indicated “not religious,” *n* = 479; and a “religious” group, collapsing across all other religious affiliations, *n* = 1,261).

**Measuring existential isolation.** We used the Existential Isolation Scale (Pinel et al., 2017) described in Study 1a to measure existential isolation (Cronbach’s alpha = .831).

**Measuring interpersonal isolation.** We measured interpersonal isolation using a 2-item composite assessing loneliness (“How often do you feel lonely?” and “How often do you feel left out?”), scored on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (often).

**Results**

Table 4 presents group means for existential and interpersonal isolation across each of our demographic classifications (race, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, foreign student status, native language, body weight, and social class). We predicted that participants’ mean levels of existential isolation would vary as a function of their group membership, such that those belonging to non-dominant cultural groups in the U.S. would, on average, exhibit higher existential isolation than those belonging to the dominant cultural groups. As with Study 1a, we did not expect to see a parallel pattern of differences in interpersonal isolation. And indeed, looking at participants’ levels of existential isolation as a function of race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, citizenship/foreign student status, native language, heavyweight status, and socioeconomic status, we see this pattern emerge (see Table 4). This is true when comparing the existential isolation scores of *Hispanic* to *White/non-Hispanic* participants, *F*(1, 1237) = 11.30, *p* = .001, *d* = .21; *non-White* to *White* participants, *F*(1, 1609) = 6.94, *p* = .009, *d* = .13; *non-religious* to *religious* participants, *F*(1, 1738) = 33.18, *p* < .001, *d* = .30; those who identify as *lesbian, gay, or bisexual* to those who identify as *heterosexual*, *F*(1, 1662) = 5.17, *p* = .023, *d* = .23; *non-native English speakers* to *native English speakers*, *F*(1, 1760) = 9.85, *p* = .002, *d* = .23; and *heavyweight* to *non-heavyweight* participants, *F*(1, 1599) = 6.81, *p* = .009, *d* = .16. Although not statistically significant (*p* = .176), the trend for *non-citizens (foreign students)* versus *citizens (U.S. students)* followed this same pattern, *d* = .12. Finally, results indicated a significant difference in existential isolation between socioeconomic status groups, *F*(5, 1782) = 10.93, *p* < .001, ηp2 = .029, suchthat levels of existential isolation appeared generally higher among low-SES individuals and lower among high-SES individuals (see Table 4 and Figure 1). Bonferroni post-hoc analyses revealed that individuals identifying as “lower class” (here representing the clearest membership in an SES-based non-dominant group) reported significantly higher existential isolation than almost all other SES groups, and the mean differences generally increased as the social distance between SES groups grew: between lower class and lower-middle class (*Mdiff* = 0.69, *p* = .016), middle class (*Mdiff* = 0.87, *p* < .001), upper-middle class (*Mdiff* = 1.05, *p* < .001), and finally upper class (*M­diff* = 0.88, *p* = .001)[[5]](#footnote-5).

Importantly, we saw no such significant differences in interpersonal isolation across the majority of our group dimensions, including between *non-White* and *White* participants (*p* = .326), *Hispanic* and *White/non-Hispanic* participants (*p* = .088), *non-native English speakers* and *native English speakers* (*p* = .623), *heavyweight* and *non-heavyweight* participants (*p* = .125), and *non-citizens (foreign students)* and *citizens (U.S. students*; *p* = .376). Contrary to Study 1a’s findings, we did in fact observe a pattern similar to that of existential isolation (i.e. higher interpersonal isolation in non-dominant groups) across three of our group dimensions: between *non-religious* and *religious* participants, *F*(1, 1720) = 5.72, *p* = .017, *d* = .13, those who identify as *lesbian, gay, or bisexual* and those who identify as *heterosexual*, *F*(1, 1655) = 44.47, *p* < .001, *d* = .73, and *low SES* and *high SES* participants, *F*(1, 1759) = 7.79, *p* < .001, ηp2 = .022. For two of these dimensions (religious affiliation and SES), however, the effect sizes of the difference in existential isolation were larger (*d* = .30, ηp2 = .29, respectively) than those of the difference in interpersonal isolation (*d* = .13, ηp2 = .22, respectively). Thus, though members of non-dominant groups may display higher levels of both forms of social isolation than their dominant counterparts, these results suggest that the dominant/non-dominant group distinction may in fact be more meaningful for existential isolation than for interpersonal isolation. The exception to this pattern is sexual orientation, for which the effect size for interpersonal isolation (*d* = .73) vastly outweighs that for existential isolation (*d* = .23). To fully understand this exception, we will need more research that targets the LGB population specifically and that recruits large samples of people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

**Studies 1a and 1b Discussion**

Across Studies 1a and 1b, we observed that individuals who fall into non-dominant groups, whether through self-identification or categorization by the researchers based on commonly accepted standards (e.g., BMI cut-offs), exhibit consistently and most often significantly higher levels of existential isolation than those who fall into dominant groups. Importantly, we did not generally observe the same pattern of group differences when it came to two common measures used in the literature on interpersonal isolation: the need to belong (Leary et al., 2007) and loneliness (CITATIONS). Indeed, even in the few instances in which loneliness followed the same pattern as existential isolation (i.e. greater for non-dominant groups), existential isolation often emerged as more heavily impacted by the dominant/non-dominant group distinction. This further underscores the uniqueness of the existential isolation construct, as well as the importance of considering the varieties of isolation and belonging and how they may manifest differently in groups and in individuals.

Having established in Studies 1a and 1b that members of non-dominant groups report higher levels of existential isolation (but not necessarily interpersonal isolation) than members of dominant groups, we turn our attention in Study 2 to a hypothesized epistemic consequence of this existential isolation (Pinel, 2018): feelings of uncertainty about one’s own experiences and interpretations.

**Study 2**

Existential isolation can threaten people’s confidence in their interpretation of reality. We, as “social animals,” develop our conceptions of reality with the help of others who share those conceptions (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Echterhoff et al., 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Swann & Bosson, 2010). It follows that people who feel existentially isolated – who feel that no one else understands the way they experience the world or experiences it quite like them – will report less certainty in their beliefs (Pinel et al., 2017; Yalom, 1980).

For members of non-dominant groups, who are often also targets of stigma as a function of their non-dominant group membership, feelings of uncertainty could manifest with regard to judgments of whether or not they experienced acts of prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination. Consider, for example, the all-too common response of women who report experiencing sexual harassment years after it actually occurred and are asked why they did not report it earlier. Many explain that they just were not sure what they experienced was real. (CITATIONS)

In Study 2, we concentrate on the judgments of racism made by Black Americans. In particular, we ask whether individual differences in existential isolation uniquely predict the certainty with which Black individuals make attributions to discrimination. The experience of existential isolation, as we have theorized, calls into question one’s sense of reality, of feeling like one understands the world around him or her. In line with this uncertainty, we expected that higher levels of existential isolation in Black participants exposed to potentially racist scenarios would predict fewer attributions to discrimination and, more importantly, greater uncertainty regarding such judgments.

**Method**

**Participants**

Fifty-four participants provided complete data for this study. Of these, 45 identified as Black and 7 identified as biracial and two did not identify themselves. Eleven participants identified as male; 43 identified as female. Because of this imbalance of gender group size, we could not test for gender effects. However, when we ran the same analyses presented in the results section with females only, we observed essentially the same results.

**Procedure and Materials**

Participants completed the study online. The study involved making judgments as to the degree of racism inherent in three separate racism scenarios and then completing measures of existential isolation (Pinel, Long, Murdoch, & Johnson, 2014) and interpersonal isolation (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2013). These measures came second, so that they would not prime participants with each type of isolation, thereby rendering the results ambiguous (Pinel & Long, 2012; Steele, 1988). The study began once participants read a consent statement and agreed to proceed.

**Judging Racism.** Participants read three scenarios involving potentially racist interactions (for the complete scenarios, see Appendix A). The first scenario involved a potentially racist professor who regularly calls on a White student even though an African-American student repeatedly attempts to participate. The second scenario involved a shopkeeper who checks the bag of an African-American patron who sets off the alarm while exiting, but who then does not check the bag of a White patron who also sets off the alarm. The third scenario involved an African-American and a White job applicant with seemingly comparable credentials. The White person gets the job.

After each scenario, participants indicated the extent to which they perceived the scenario as racist and how certain they were of this racism judgment. They made these judgments on 9-point scales. The response scale for the racism question ranged from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much), and the response scale for the certainty question ranged from 1 (not at all certain) to 9 (very certain). We combined these judgments of racism and the certainty of these judgments into indices of racism judgment (alpha = .73) and certainty of the judgment (alpha = .69).

**Measuring Existential Isolation.**As in Studies 1a and 1b, we used the Existential Isolation Scale (Pinel et al., 2017)to measure existential isolation. Participants responded to each of the six items using a 7-point scale ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

**Measuring Interpersonal Isolation.**To measure interpersonal isolation, we used the Need to Belong scale (Leary et al., 2013). The Need to Belong scale serves this function well, given its inclusion of items such as “I would not like to be alone,” “Being apart from my friends for long periods of time would not bother me (reverse-coded);” and “It would bother me a great deal if I were not included in other people’s plans.” As such, it emphasizes an interpersonal variety of isolation. Pinel et al.’s (2014) scale validation work establishes the discriminant validity of the existential isolation scale relative to the Need to Belong Scale.

**Results**

Our analyses concentrated on existential isolation and interpersonal isolation and their ability to predict racism and certainty judgments. To this end, we submitted both of these predictors to two separate simultaneous regression analyses, one predicting racism and one predicting certainty. In neither case did interpersonal isolation emerge as a significant predictor, *t*’s < 1. Existential isolation, on the other hand, marginally predicted racism judgments (** = -.25, *t* = -1.81, *p* < .08), but, more importantly, significantly predicted certainty judgments (** = -.31, *t* = -2.32, *p* < .03).

**Discussion**

The results from Study 2 suggest that existential isolation plays a unique role in the confidence with which members of non-dominant groups hold their conceptions of reality. Specifically, we found that, after exposure to a series of potentially racist scenarios, Black participants high in existential isolation made fewer attributions to prejudice and reported greater uncertainty about those judgments. Importantly, this pattern did not hold for interpersonal isolation.

At first blush, it may seem beneficial for members of non-dominant groups to remain “blissfully ignorant” to instances of discrimination. Indeed, research shows that perceiving prejudice against oneself or one’s social group can have severe consequences for the target’s psychological, emotional, and even physical well-being (Dion, 1975; Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999; Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002). However, there is a great deal of competing evidence suggesting that the ability and certainty with which one is able to recognize and make clear attributions to discrimination is crucial to healthy psychological functioning for members of non-dominant groups. For example, failing to recognize prejudice prevents members of non-dominant groups from utilizing adaptive coping strategies or taking action against discrimination (e.g., Kaiser & Miller, 2001; OTHER CITATIONS). Research also shows that making attributions to prejudice often serves an adaptive purpose, allowing the target to attribute negative feedback to their stigmatized group and therefore protect their personal self-concept (Crocker & Major, 1989; OTHER CITATIONS). This is especially important for instances of ambiguous discrimination like those described in this study, as targets often have more difficulty recognizing, coping with, and addressing ambiguous bias in comparison to blatant bias (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007).

Given the advantages of being able (and disadvantages of being unable) to make attributions to discrimination and be relatively certain of those judgments, the results of this study suggest that high levels of existential isolation could be especially harmful among non-dominant group members.

**General Discussion**

We focused here on chronic, dispositional feelings of existential isolation among members of non-dominant groups, as well as on one potential consequence of such feelings. In Studies 1a and 1b, we reasoned that members of non-dominant groups would report higher levels of existential isolation than members of dominant groups because, by definition, dominant groups shape the reality for a given culture. Belonging to the non-dominant culture, then, brings a much greater chance of *not* seeing one’s experiences and perspectives reflected the world around them. Consistent with our theorizing, we observed that individuals belonging to non-dominant groups in the U.S. exhibited consistently and most often significantly higher levels of existential isolation than those belonging to dominant groups. Importantly, we did not generally observe the same pattern of group differences when it came to two common measures used in the literature on interpersonal isolation: the need to belong (Leary et al., 2007) and loneliness (citation). Indeed, even in the few instances in which loneliness followed the same pattern as existential isolation (i.e. greater for non-dominant groups), existential isolation often emerged as the more impacted by the dominant/non-dominant group distinction. This further underscores the uniqueness of the existential isolation construct, as well as the importance of considering the varieties of isolation and belonging and how they many manifest differently in groups and in individuals.

Study 2 built on these findings to show that high levels of existential isolation have epistemic correlates insofar as our highly existentially isolated Black participants reported greater uncertainty in their judgments of discrimination than their low existential isolationcounterparts. This finding was specific to existential isolation. Research shows that having a confident sense of whether or not one has encountered prejudice or discrimination makes a measurable difference in the lives of targets (Crocker & Major, 1989; Major & Sawyer, 2009; Pinel, 2004; Pinel & Bosson, 2013). Indeed, the ability to and certainty with which one makes such judgments is an important contributor to one’s well-being. Existential isolation, as a threat to that process, therefore represents an especially vulnerable state for non-dominant group members.

HERE I MIGHT INSERT OTHER POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES OF EI FOR FOLKS IN NON-DOMINANT GROUPS. THIS MIGHT BE A PLACE WHERE WE TALK ABOUT HEALTH AND BRING IN THE CULTURAL FIT STUFF.

Taken together, our results indicate a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts: non-dominant group members experience higher levels of existential isolation than their dominant counterparts, and this overabundance puts non-dominant group members at especial risk for the negative consequences of prejudice and discrimination. In other words, the people who are most likely to face stigma as a result of their group membership are also – as a function of that group membership – the people who may be least equipped to handle that stigma.

Establishing that there exist unique, trait-level differences in existential isolation between dominant and non-dominant group members constitutes an important contribution to the literature. A large body of research devoted to understanding the experiences of non-dominant group members has documented the negative consequences associated with not belonging to the dominant culture; previous work has highlighted the role of belongingness – or rather, *lack* of belongingness. However, the current research represents the first attempt to parse apart these distinct manifestations of belonging. As the body of research on existential isolation grows, and our knowledge of its unique negative consequences and correlates expands, so too does the need to explicitly consider it in contexts that have typically involved a broader construal of belonging (or the lack thereof).

As we look toward continuing research on this important topic, we recognize and seek to consider further the question of intersectionality. We all claim multiple identities and multiple group memberships; comorbidity of non-dominant group status (e.g., race and SES) is likely, and although many of our non-dominant group sizes in Studies 1a and 1b were too small to test this directly, we anticipate that such an overlap of group memberships would be associated with differential levels of existential isolation. Existing research on the experiences of those with intersecting stigmatized identities suggests that the effects may be multiplicative (e.g., Gonzales, Blanton, & Williams, 2002; Remedios & Snyder, 2015); if so, those belonging to multiple non-dominant groups may be at especial risk for heightened levels of existential isolation and its consequences. Further, as mentioned in our discussion of gender, some group memberships may override others in certain contexts or situations. In one context or from one perspective, we may appear a part of the dominant culture; in or from another, we may not. This could have important implications for how people navigate their social world, consciously or unconsciously emphasizing or hiding certain aspects of their identity in order to conform to the dominant culture and buffer themselves from feelings of existential isolation. Self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) holds that, when confronted with a threat (e.g., a salient reminder that one does not belong to the dominant culture), individuals will distance themselves from aspects of the self that are harmful (e.g., one’s non-dominant group identity), and instead affirm other, positive aspects of the self (e.g., an alternative identity perhaps more closely aligned with the dominant culture) to maintain an overall positive self-concept and self-esteem (see Mussweiler et al., 2000). Evocative evidence in the stereotype threat literature – as with gender and math performance, wherein women choose to distance themselves from the female group to buffer performance decrements (see Rydell, McConnell, & Beilock, 2009) – supports this theorizing and provides a glimpse into how these processes may apply in the context of existential isolation.

Our findings build upon previous literature acknowledging the importance of promoting inclusion on an interpersonal level, underscoring the importance of considering inclusion on an *existential* level as well. A conceptual difference between interpersonal and existential isolation, and between experiences of them by members of the dominant and non-dominant culture, implies that there may be factors that uniquely trigger existential isolation – factors that will be important to identify in the interest of promoting intergroup harmony and preempting the unique vulnerability that existential isolation imposes on non-dominant group members. Even seemingly small details as the use of dominant culture-based examples in the classroom (heteronormative situations, White names, etc.) could perpetuate an atmosphere that triggers feelings of existential isolation for members of the non-dominant culture. Now that we know that members of the non-dominant culture suffer from elevated existential isolation levels we can begin to work on some directed ways to counteract this side effect of belonging to non-dominant cultures. Part of this will involve educating the general public on the psychological consequences of assuming that everyone experiences reality through the same lens. Another part of this will involve cultivating moments of shared experience, across the dominant/non-dominant group divide. Beyond the lofty goal of changing the dominant culture and ensuring that all experiences and perspectives are represented and validated in homes, classrooms, workplaces, and mainstream media, a more attainable goal may instead be informed by some of our own work on I-sharing.

*I-sharing*, or the feeling of sharing subjective experiences with others (e.g., Pinel, Long, Landau, Alexander, & Pyszczynski, 2006), represents the other side of the existential isolation coin. When someone feels like they I-share with another person, it is tantamount to feeling existentially connected. Research on I-sharing has shown that it can lead to a number of positive interpersonal outcomes, such as liking for the I-sharing partner (e.g., Pinel et al., 2006; Pinel et al., 2004; Pinel & Long, 2010) and willingness to help the I-sharing partner (Huneke & Pinel, 2015; Pinel, Long, Johnson, & Yawger, 2018). Importantly, a number of these outcomes even cross group lines; repeatedly, research shows that I-sharing with an outgroup member overrides the natural tendency toward ingroup favoritism (Pinel & Long, 2012; Pinel et al., 2018). Further, recent studies have found that I-sharing across the dominant/non-dominant group divide can reduce the occurrence and/or impacts of such harmful interpersonal processes as dehumanization (Pinel, Yawger, Long, Rampy, Brenna, & Finnell, 2017) and homonegativity (Pinel, Bronson, Zapata, & Bosson, 2018).

Importantly, I-sharing can happen in spite of objective differences between people, such as whether they belong to the same social group, come from the same background or share the same values. Interventions that promote I-sharing could thus prove incredibly valuable in efforts to bridge the dominant/non-dominant gap. Cultivating shared experiences through I-sharing, at least on a small scale, may very well be an attainable and effective method of addressing the problem of existential isolation in non-dominant group members. Not everyone will identify as a member of a dominant cultural group (or even want to), but I-sharing offers hope that experiences of reality can still be shared across the cultural divide.

**Deleted excerpts from other sections**

Consider more examples: a gay male student sits in class, listening to a professor offer up clichéd accounts of heterosexual dating as “real-world examples” of psychological theory on romantic relationships. While the rest of his class laughs in amusement, he feels out of existential place, alone in his frustration at the heterosexist assumptions that underlie his professor’s illustrations (Swim, Johnston, & Pearson, 2009). He may feel like he belongs, as a psychology major in a psychology class. He may feel like he belongs, as a student amongst students. He may feel like he belongs, as he sits between two of his close friends. And yet, none of these indicators of interpersonal belonging can directly touch or erase his sense that, existentially speaking, he does not quite belong. He does not experience the clichés in the same way as his heterosexual counterparts, who form the dominant culture of the classroom and the United States at large.

Alternatively, consider the adopted child of unmarried lesbians, who repeatedly receives subtle (or not so subtle) hints that, in a culture that holds up a household consisting of a married mother and father and their biological children as the ideal, their family life is not quite the *norm*. For example, an elementary school teacher asks, “Are your mommy and daddy coming to parent-teacher night?”; a classmate gushes, “My mom showed me her wedding dress, and it was so pretty! What did your mom’s look like?”; a friend comments, “I have what my dad calls the ‘Scheurmann’ nose; all the men in my family have it.” This child will grow up sensing that their experiences in their family differ in sometimes mundane, sometimes dramatic, ways from what is considered normative. Such repeated reminders that one lives in a different reality from others could contribute to heightened feelings of existential isolation.

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Table 1

*Study 1a: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 1,449)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Characteristic | % | *n* |
| Gender (*n* = 1,428) |  |  |
| Female | 66.5 | 950 |
| Male | 33.5 | 478 |
| Ethnicity (*n* = 1,332) |  |  |
| Non-Hispanic | 96.8 | 1,289 |
| Hispanic | 3.2 | 43 |
| Race (*n* = 1,316) |  |  |
| White | 89.0 | 1,171 |
| Asian or Asian-American | 5.0 | 66 |
| Black or African-American | 2.6 | 35 |
| Multiracial | 2.0 | 26 |
| Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander | 0.3 | 4 |
| Other | 1.1 | 14 |
| Citizenship/Foreign Student Status (*n* = 685) |  |  |
| U.S. citizen | 97.5 | 668 |
| Non-U.S. citizen (foreign student) | 2.5 | 17 |
| Religious Affiliation (*n* = 903) |  |  |
| Religious | 83.6 | 755 |
| Non-religious | 16.4 | 148 |
| Sexual Orientation (*n* = 344) |  |  |
| Heterosexual | 96.8 | 333 |
| Lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) | 3.2 | 11 |

Table 2

*Study 1a: Existential Isolation and Need to Belong Z-scores by Race, Ethnicity, Religious Affiliation, Sexual Orientation, and Citizenship*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Existential Isolation | | Need to Belong | |
|  | *M (SD)* | *n* | *M (SD)* | *n* |
| *Race* |  |  |  |  |
| Non-White | 0.18 (0.98) | 105 | -0.26 (1.17) | 65 |
| White | -0.03 (0.99) | 1,171 | 0.03 (0.99) | 943 |
| *Ethnicity* |  |  |  |  |
| Hispanic | 0.29 (1.18) | 43 | -0.38 (1.03) | 26 |
| Non-Hispanic | -0.01 (0.99) | 1,289 | 0.02 (1.00) | 1,012 |
| *Religious Affiliation* |  |  |  |  |
| Non-religious | 0.32 (0.97) | 148 | -0.03 (1.00) | 148 |
| Religious | -0.06 (1.00) | 755 | 0.00 (0.99) | 753 |
| *Sexual Orientation* |  |  |  |  |
| LGB | 0.50 (1.31) | 11 | -0.52 (0.90) | 11 |
| Heterosexual | -0.02 (0.98) | 333 | 0.02 (1.00) | 331 |
| *Citizenship* |  |  |  |  |
| Non-U.S. citizen | 0.25 (1.08) | 17 | 0.09 (1.66) | 17 |
| U.S. citizen | -0.01 (0.99) | 668 | 0.00 (0.98) | 665 |

Table 3

*Study 1b: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 1,778)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Characteristic | % | *n* |
| Gender (*n* = 1,777) |  |  |
| Female | 61.5 | 1,093 |
| Male | 38.5 | 684 |
| Race/Ethnicity (*n* = 1,580) |  |  |
| European-American | 42.0 | 664 |
| Hispanic-American | 24.1 | 380 |
| Asian-American | 7.2 | 113 |
| Jewish-American | 6.1 | 96 |
| African-American | 5.6 | 89 |
| Native-American | 2.5 | 39 |
| Pacific Islander-American | 1.6 | 26 |
| Arab-American | 0.9 | 14 |
| Other | 10.1 | 159 |
| Citizenship/Foreign Student Status (*n* = 1,763) |  |  |
| Non-foreign (U.S.) student | 91.4 | 1,611 |
| Foreign student | 8.6 | 152 |
| Religious Affiliation (*n* = 1,722) |  |  |
| Catholic | 25.7 | 443 |
| Christian (other) | 17.2 | 297 |
| Agnostic | 16.6 | 286 |
| Christian (non-denominational) | 14.4 | 248 |
| Atheist | 8.7 | 150 |
| Jewish | 5.3 | 91 |
| Buddhist | 2.3 | 40 |
| Muslim | 2.0 | 35 |
| Mormon | 0.9 | 16 |
| Protestant | 0.8 | 14 |
| Hindu | 0.6 | 10 |
| Other | 5.3 | 92 |
| Sexual Orientation (*n* = 1,664) |  |  |
| Heterosexual | 94.2 | 1,568 |
| Bisexual | 3.4 | 57 |
| Homosexual | 1.9 | 32 |
| Other | 0.4 | 7 |
| Native Language (*n* = 1,762) |  |  |
| Native English speaker | 87.1 | 1,534 |
| Non-native English speaker | 12.9 | 228 |
| Heavyweight Status (*n* = 1,601) |  |  |
| Non-heavyweight (BMI ≤ 25) | 77.8 | 1,245 |
| Heavyweight (BMI > 25) | 22.2 | 356 |
| Socioeconomic Status (*n* = 1,765) |  |  |
| Lower class | 1.5 | 27 |
| Working class | 4.4 | 78 |
| Lower-middle class | 10.8 | 191 |
| Middle class | 38.6 | 681 |
| Upper-middle class | 39.4 | 695 |
| Upper class | 5.3 | 93 |

Table 4

*Study 1b: Existential Isolation and Loneliness by Race, Sexual Orientation, Religious Affiliation, Citizenship, Native Language, Heavyweight Status, and Socioeconomic Status*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Existential Isolation | | Loneliness | |
|  | *M (SD)* | *n* | *M (SD)* | *n* |
| *Race* |  |  |  |  |
| Non-White | 3.81 (1.02) | 751 | 2.59 (0.71) | 751 |
| White | 3.67 (1.08) | 860 | 2.56 (0.67) | 860 |
| *Sexual Orientation* |  |  |  |  |
| LGB | 3.97 (1.13) | 96 | 3.04 (0.67) | 89 |
| Heterosexual | 3.72 (1.04) | 1,568 | 2.55 (0.68) | 1,568 |
| *Religious Affiliation* |  |  |  |  |
| Non-religious | 3.98 (1.08) | 479 | 2.64 (0.70) | 436 |
| Religious | 3.66 (1.02) | 1,261 | 2.55 (0.68) | 1,286 |
| *Citizenship* |  |  |  |  |
| Non-U.S. citizen | 3.86 (0.90) | 152 | 2.53 (0.75) | 152 |
| U.S. citizen | 3.74 (1.06) | 1,611 | 2.58 (0.69) | 1,611 |
| *Native Language* |  |  |  |  |
| Non-native English speaker | 3.95 (0.93) | 228 | 2.55 (0.76) | 228 |
| Native English speaker | 3.72 (1.06) | 1,534 | 2.58 (0.68) | 1,534 |
| *Heavyweight Status* |  |  |  |  |
| Heavyweight (BMI > 25) | 3.86 (1.01) | 356 | 2.63 (0.70) | 356 |
| Non-heavyweight (BMI ≤ 25) | 3.69 (1.06) | 1,245 | 2.56 (0.69) | 1,245 |
| *Socioeconomic Status* |  |  |  |  |
| Lower class | 4.64 (1.21) | 27 | 2.70 (0.95) | 27 |
| Working class | 4.11 (0.98) | 78 | 2.83 (0.71) | 78 |
| Lower-middle class | 3.94 (0.97) | 191 | 2.66 (0.71) | 191 |
| Middle class | 3.78 (1.03) | 681 | 2.64 (0.69) | 681 |
| Upper-middle class | 3.59 (1.04) | 695 | 2.48 (0.65) | 695 |
| Upper class | 3.74 (1.09) | 93 | 2.40 (0.69) | 93 |

Figure 1

*Graph of Existential Isolation by Socioeconomic Status (Study 1a)*



*Note.* Errors bars represent 95% CI.

1. Given that nearly 80% of Americans identify with some form of religion (despite a growing non-religious minority; Pew Research Center, 2015), we considered people *without a religious affiliation* to represent the non-dominant culture. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A portion of these data were used for a different purpose (i.e. the validation of the Existential Isolation Scale) and are published elsewhere (Pinel et al., 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We recognize that information gets lost when we reduce the data in this way and we encourage theory-driven work that actively seeks out enrollment from traditionally underrepresented samples. Despite the drawbacks, reducing the data as we have enabled us to make meaningful comparisons with an otherwise unwieldy number of groups. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gender did not interact with any of our group dimensions, except for one: ethnicity (*F*[1, 1319] = 4.37, *p* = .037). Though the small number of Hispanic men in our sample limits our ability to properly decompose this interaction, a combination of inspecting group means and conducting planned contrasts showed that, among non-Hispanics, men report more existential isolation than women (*F*[1, 1319] = 43.64, *p* < .001), as expected per previous research; among Hispanics, though, we see no statistically significant differences in existential isolation (*F*[1, 1319] = 1.24, *p* = .266). This may have something to do with the collectivism that also tends to characterize LatinX cultures (citation), but hesitate to make too much of this finding at this juncture because it did not replicate in Study 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gender did not interact with any of our group dimensions, with the exception of one that fell just beyond the .05 level of significance: body weight (*F*[1, 1596] = 3.64, *p* = .057). Among non-heavyweight participants, men exhibited typically higher levels of existential isolation than women (*Mdiff* = 0.31, *F*[1, 1596] = 24.35, *p* < .001); however, for heavyweight participants, the gender difference disappeared (*p* = .547). Additionally, the failure to replicate Study 1a’s interaction between gender and ethnicity suggests that it may have been the product of sampling error. Future research should attempt to shed further light on the potential moderating effects of gender on various dominant/non-dominant group dimensions. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)