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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3xd8q72n>

Journal

Australian Journal of Psychology, 73(1)

ISSN

0004-9530

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Publication Date

2021-01-02

DOI

10.1080/00049530.2021.1883411

Peer reviewed



Introducing a dual continuum model of belonging and loneliness

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ABSTRACT

Scholars and social commentators have noted the escalating rates of loneliness among global societies for more than a decade. The need to quarantine, self-isolate, and physically distance during the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the way we interacted with each other – exacerbating feelings of loneliness. A sense of belonging and loneliness are sometimes used interchangeably and the research on their shared and distinct aspects is limited. One shared demographic vulnerability in the belonging and loneliness research is the focus on adolescents and young adults. This paper brings together research on the association between the two constructs as a way to explore the utility of belonging-focused perspectives and approaches for addressing loneliness at multiple socio-ecological levels. A proposed conceptual Dual Continuum Model of Belonging and Loneliness presents a multifaceted categorisation of the conjoint loneliness and belonging relationship. This paper highlights the role of belonging in addressing loneliness, which has critical implications for ongoing research and intervention.

KEY POINTS

What is already known about this topic:

- (1) Loneliness is considered to arise from a universal human need to belong.
- (2) Loneliness and belonging are important constructs for social wellbeing.
- (3) A sense of belonging and loneliness are terms that are often used interchangeably.

What this topic adds:

- (1) The loneliness and belonging research have similarities but are also distinct.
- (2) Loneliness and belonging could be conceptualised within a dual continuum model.
- (3) The proposed dual model demonstrates that there is much more to understand about these constructs—theoretically, conceptually and empirically.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 December 2020
Accepted 23 December 2020

KEYWORDS

Belonging; loneliness; model

The recent COVID-19 health crisis emphasises the importance of social relationships for people to not just live but to thrive and flourish. People have been asked to quarantine, self-isolate, and physically distance to curb rising infection rates (Smith & Lim, 2020). These necessary public health practices have led to changes in the way people interact with family, friends, colleagues, and neighbours. A consequence of these practices has led to increased attention on loneliness and social isolation. Loneliness is a term describing a *subjective* feeling of social isolation that arises when there is a difference between actual and desired relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1982) and differs from objective indicators of social isolation (e.g., degree of contact with others or living alone). Loneliness is posited to arise from a human need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Belonging is defined more broadly in

the literature, in that it can relate to belonging to a place or an experience (Allen, 2020); and the belonging subtype that is likely to be relevant to loneliness is social belonging. Belonging and loneliness are related constructs in that both are subjective states and part of normal human experience (Mellor et al., 2008).

One of the current challenges in the field is to decipher the conceptual relationship between loneliness and belonging. Specifically, what are their shared and distinct aspects? For example, what shared mechanisms drive a lower sense of belonging and higher levels of loneliness? Does a lower sense of belonging always lead to higher loneliness? Can one feel a lack of belonging and loneliness simultaneously? This paper highlights areas in which the loneliness and belonging scientific literature overlap and disentangles these constructs where possible.