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Existential Isolation as a Risk Factor for Depression and Suicide Ideation in LGBTQ+ Adults

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INTRODUCTION

- This study examines the role of existential isolation (EI), or the feeling that others cannot fully understand one's subjective experiences, in shaping mental health and well-being among LGBTQ+ young adults.
- Although EI has been linked to psychological distress in general populations, little research has examined its implications for sexual and gender minority individuals, who may face unique social and identity-related challenges.
- This first study involves a large-scale online survey assessing EI, minority stress experiences, and psychological well-being among LGBTQ+ adults.

METHOD

- $N = 900$ Prolific participants (523 women; 363 men; 14 other); $M_{age} = 32.87$, $SD = 10.89$.
- Measured EI: Six items; $\alpha = .90$.
 - "People do not often share my perspective."
- Measured Internalized LGBTQ+ Stigma: Nine items; $\alpha = .64$.
 - "I wish I weren't LGBTQ+."
- Quality of Life; Four items; $\alpha = .86$.
 - "In general, would you say your life is:
 - Poor
 - Fair
 - Good
 - Very
 - Excellent"
- Meaning in Life: Ten items; $\alpha = .64$.
 - Presence: Five items; $\alpha = .94$.
 - "My life has a good sense of purpose."
 - Search: Five items; $\alpha = .95$.
 - "I am searching for meaning in my life."
- Suicide Ideation: Nineteen items; $\alpha = .89$.
 - "Psychological pain is unbearable."
- Depression: Ten items; $\alpha = .91$.
 - "I could not 'get going'."

KEY FINDINGS

Correlation Matrix of Existential Isolation, Internalized Stigma, and Well-being Outcomes.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Existential Isolation	-							
2. Internalized Stigma	0.24**	-						
3. MIL Presence	-0.38**	-0.02	-					
4. MIL Search	0.30**	0.26**	-0.37**	-				
5. Depression	0.54**	0.19**	-0.60**	-0.28**	-			
6. Suicidal Ideation	0.49**	0.33**	-0.39**	-0.11	0.73**	-		
7. Quality of Life	-0.45**	-0.07*	0.53**	-0.12	-0.67**	-0.47**	-	
8. Loneliness	0.58	0.29**	-0.43**	0.02	0.64*	0.54**	-0.44**	-

Note. * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.005$

- EI is associated with poorer meaning in life and higher suicidal ideation.**

DISCUSSION

- Initial analyses indicate that EI among LGBTQ+ participants is associated with higher levels of depression and suicidal ideation and lower levels of meaning in life.
- These results remained significant even when controlling for loneliness, a variable that is known to be related to EI.
- A series of mediation analyses suggested that these associations are particularly pronounced among individuals who hold internalized stigma related to their LGBTQ+ identity.
- Specifically, individuals who reported greater stigma consciousness also reported higher levels of EI.
- Heightened feelings of EI, in turn, were also associated with reduced meaning in life, higher depression, and greater suicidal ideation.

APPLIED IMPLICATIONS

- This study establishes initial evidence that existential isolation is associated with poorer well-being among LGBTQ+ individuals, an important next step is to identify ways to reduce existential isolation.
- One promising avenue involves I-sharing, which refers to moments in which individuals feel that they share the same subjective experience with another person (e.g., reacting in the same way to a stimulus at the same moment).
- Future studies will explore whether experimentally inducing I-sharing can reduce existential isolation and improve psychological well-being among LGBTQ+ individuals.