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Defining “human apartness” in contextual behavioral science: A protocol for a systematic scoping review of variables, measures, and perspectives

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ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

Support - None.

Review Stage at time of this submission - The review has not yet started.

Conflicts of interest - None declared.

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Amendments - This protocol was registered with the International Platform of Registered Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (INPLASY) on 26 March 2024 and was last updated on 26 March 2024.

INTRODUCTION

Review question / Objective As an initial step towards a more robust understanding of human apartness, this scoping review will survey the literature and investigate key variables (e.g., overt and covert behaviors) and the content of their definitions. This will serve to develop and propose an established conceptual definition of human apartness. This review also aims to propose consensus for a contextual behavioral operational definition for the human apartness construct and advise behavioral researchers about the current state of the literature, potential variables of interest, and other areas for further development. The specific research questions of this scoping review include:

1. What are the various human apartness constructs used in the existent literature?
2. How are prominent apartness constructs currently being defined, and what key overlaps emerge among conceptual definitions?

3. Given the above findings, how can contextual behavioral scientists conceptually and operationally define human apartness?

4. How are apartness constructs currently being measured? Specifically, what are the measures and what are their psychometric properties (i.e., reliability, validity, consistency)? Does the language used in these measures facilitate the identification of specific behavior-environment relations (e.g., can be understood in terms of setting, relational responding, function transformation, discriminative stimuli)?

5. What are some potential areas of focus for future directions that contextual behavioral scientists can take to further investigate the human apartness construct?

Background The rapid escalation of technological communication, remote work, and telehealth practices in recent years has led to increased interest related to loneliness, isolation, and other forms of separation from other humans (e.g., Ernst

et al., 2022; Killgore et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2020). Nevertheless, there does not appear to be a working framework from which to synthesize the vast literature these questions produce. Consequently, those interested in investigating how individuals are psychologically and physically separated from interaction with other humans are met with countless terms (e.g., perceived ostracism, preference for solitude, loneliness, aloneness, self-isolation) used to describe various forms of the construct. Research on variables associated with “human apartness” comes from diverse subfields of psychology, each approaching the phenomenon from unique perspectives and using varied conceptualizations like loneliness (e.g., Motta, 2021), aloneliness (e.g., Coplan et al., 2019), and social isolation (e.g., Wang et al., 2017). Across these subfields, apartness from others is often associated with psychopathologies, morbidity, and mortality (Haslam et al., 2015; Whisman & Robustelli, 2016). These associations may point to important underlying transdiagnostic factors to explore in basic, applied, and translational research. However, no consensual definition for human apartness exists. This is especially true for the concept of intentional human apartness, wherein the same topographical apartness behavior may serve differing functions across contexts and individuals, and thus may lead to workable or unworkable outcomes (e.g., self-care versus maintenance of anxiety). However, human apartness is largely viewed as having limiting or detrimental consequences, further enhancing our desire to explore this variable. Taken together, these issues present a threat to growth and understanding regarding human apartness. As such, analyses will focus on the potential creation of functional and topographical categories and definitions of human apartness. Developing an established research lexicon for synthesizing the existing literature is necessary for a cohesive framework to guide future research questions and hypotheses. In addition, it is the hope of the authors that contextual reframing of human apartness may help to reduce bias and improve relevant interventions.

Rationale There does not appear to be a working framework from which to synthesize the vast literature these questions produce. Consequently, those interested in investigating how individuals are psychologically and physically separated from interaction with other humans are met with countless terms (e.g., perceived ostracism, preference for solitude, loneliness, aloneness, self-isolation) used to describe various forms of the construct. Research on variables associated with “human apartness” comes from diverse subfields

of psychology, each approaching the phenomenon from unique perspectives and using varied conceptualizations like loneliness (e.g., Motta, 2021), aloneliness (e.g., Coplan et al., 2019), and social isolation (e.g., Wang et al., 2017). Across these subfields, apartness from others is often associated with psychopathologies, morbidity, and mortality (Haslam et al., 2015; Whisman & Robustelli, 2016). These associations may point to important underlying transdiagnostic factors to explore in basic, applied, and translational research. However, no consensual definition for human apartness exists. This is especially true for the concept of intentional human apartness, wherein the same topographical apartness behavior may serve differing functions across contexts and individuals, and thus may lead to workable or unworkable outcomes (e.g., self-care versus maintenance of anxiety). However, human apartness is largely viewed as having limiting or detrimental consequences, further enhancing our desire to explore this variable. Taken together, these issues present a threat to growth and understanding regarding human apartness. As such, analyses will focus on the potential creation of functional and topographical categories and definitions of human apartness. Developing an established research lexicon for synthesizing the existing literature is necessary for a cohesive framework to guide future research questions and hypotheses. In addition, it is the hope of the authors that contextual reframing of human apartness may help to reduce bias and improve relevant interventions.

METHODS

Strategy of data synthesis The keywords and boolean search strings used will be iterative and collaborative and will continue to be updated as new keywords are identified in the literature. Thus, we will conduct a search for review, theoretical, and conceptual papers to mine keywords for constructing a comprehensive search strategy (i.e., initial search). Newly added keywords and search terms will be identified using several methods. First, we will apply our initial Boolean search strings (Table 1) to a search using Cochrane Library, EBSCO (Academic Search Complete, EDS, Mental Measurements Yearbook, PsycARTICLES, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, PsycINFO, SocINDEX with Full-Text), PubMed, Web of Science (Emerging Sources Citation Index, Science Citation Index, Social Sciences Citation Index, Web of Science Core Collection), DSM-5 Clinical Cases, JSTOR, Project Muse, Sage Knowledge Books & Reference – Psychology and Medicine & Health, ScienceDirect Freedom

Collection, and Wiley Online Library. We will extract relevant keywords and search terms by examining the review papers and meta-analyses found through our initial search. Newly added keywords and search terms will be clearly identified as they are included and reported in table form. These search terms will provide a more informed position from which to begin our primary search through a thorough overview of the literature on apartness. This will provide us with a thorough overview of the topics and keywords in the literature prior to conducting our primary search, thus refining our search strategy to be more replicable and precise. Our initial search will also be conducted to gain a broader understanding of the state of the existent literature via systematic and scoping reviews and meta-analyses.

Each review article will be reviewed by three independent reviewers (the first, third, and fourth authors of this protocol) to place into one of three categories: (1) “exclude keyword/review,” (2) “exclude keyword/include review,” and (3) “include keyword/review”. By “include keyword” we are indicating that the keyword(s) identified in the review paper will be included in a list for final determination about whether or not we will include the keyword in our primary literature search. Final decisions about keywords will be included in an addendum to this review and reported in table form. By “include review” we are indicating that the review paper is eligible for inclusion in the introduction section of our final paper. The same criteria will be used to determine eligibility for articles for both the initial and primary review stages. To review our Integrated Search Tracking databook please visit this link: <https://shorturl.at/knzGZ>.

Eligibility criteria Year: No criterion. Justification: to ensure a more complete understanding of the construct and related variables across the field.

Language: Studies published in English. Justification: the study authors are only fluent in English.

Record type: Qualitative and quantitative, empirical research studies, theoretical papers, conceptual papers. Justification: primary source materials provide a direct perspective on design and results of studies, whereas secondary and tertiary sources may obscure methods and theories used to inform research and may include conclusions unsupported by direct data.

Sample: If experimental, we will include studies featuring general, nonclinical, adult humans aged 18 and up; studies addressing both adults and children if data provided for adults is reported separately; studies addressing both adults and elderly if data provided for adults is reported

separately. Justification: the study of most human apartness constructs are more specialized in certain developmental stages (i.e., children, adolescents, late adulthood; e.g., Corsano et al., 2022; Corsano et al., 2019; Girona & Lubben, 2003) and specific clinical populations (i.e., psychiatric disorders, chronic illness; e.g., Mushtaq et al., 2014; Lewis et al., 2024). Thus, it was determined studies restricted to these populations would not add value to the review.

Setting: If experimental, we will include studies conducted with general community samples. Justification: It was determined that studies with highly specific populations would not add value to the review, as many institutional settings (e.g., prisons, education, hospitals; Cochran & Mears, 2013; Oakley, 2020; Keen et al., 2023) include contexts which pull for behaviors that other more common contexts would not.

Study Focus: If experimental, we will include studies where either the independent or dependent (or both) variable can be defined behaviorally (e.g., solitude seeking) or studies where either the independent or dependent (or both) variable is a behavior displayed by a target individual (e.g., self-ostracization) rather than directed toward them (e.g., social ostracization). Justification: the purpose of this review is to examine human apartness through a behavioral lens, thus the primary variables must be able to be defined behaviorally and be identified as behaviors performed by a target individual rather than to them. By examining human apartness through a behavioral contextual perspective, we will be better equipped to understand the factors that may contribute to the construct (Dougher & Hackbert, 2000). By taking into account that behavior is a function of the present context and one's unique learning history, clear behavioral definitions can point to the underlying functions of apartness behavior and the contexts that encourage apartness across individuals (for more information see Ribes-Iñesta et al., 2003).

Peer-reviewed: Studies published in a refereed journal. Justification: to include a high-quality pool of articles deemed appropriate for publication by the scientific community.

Source of evidence screening and selection We will conduct a search for review, theoretical, and conceptual papers to mine keywords for constructing a comprehensive search strategy (i.e., initial search). We will apply our initial Boolean search strings to a search using Cochrane Library, EBSCO (Academic Search Complete, EDS, Mental Measurements Yearbook, PsycARTICLES, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, PsycINFO, SocINDEX with Full-Text), PubMed,

Web of Science, DSM-5 Clinical Cases, JSTOR, Project Muse, and Sage Knowledge Books & Reference. Relevant keywords and search terms will be found by examining the papers found through our initial search. Newly added keywords and search terms will provide a more informed position from which to begin our primary search. Each review article will be reviewed by three independent reviewers (the first, third, and fourth authors of this protocol) to place into one of three categories: (1) “exclude keyword/review,” (2) “exclude keyword/include review,” and (3) “include keyword/review”. By “include keyword” we are indicating that the keyword(s) identified in the review paper will be included in a list for final determination about whether or not we will include the keyword in our primary literature search. Final decisions about keywords will be included in an addendum to this review and reported in table form. By “include review” we are indicating that the review paper is eligible for inclusion in the introduction section of our final paper. The same criteria will be used to determine eligibility for articles for both the initial and primary review stages. The first author will conduct both the initial and primary literature searches. Following the literature searches, the first author will download the search results from the search databases and upload the results into a shared group database. Deduplication of identified review articles will be conducted after all results are combined. Each reviewer will rate all included articles independently using a private databook that will be combined into one, master databook after each review process is completed. After combining all reviewer’s ratings into the master databook, we will calculate inter-rater agreement. A final inter-rater agreement will be calculated following all review stages. Initial screening will be completed by the principal reviewer (first author WM) and two independent secondary reviewers (third and fourth authors JPV and TER). Screening will include reviewing article titles and abstracts against eligibility criteria. Following the title and abstract screening, full-text articles will be reviewed. Any discrepancies between reviewers will be recorded and resolved through discussion until mutual agreement is reached. If consensus cannot be reached, the disagreement will be reported and final determination will be made by a fourth and final reviewer (second author, JMC and final author, DRP). Inter-rater agreement will be assessed at the initial search stage and at each stage thereafter. Inter-rater agreement will be reported in table form either in the supplemental materials or the main document.

Data management All records will be stored in an online storage drive accessible to all team members. Data will be extracted, deduplicated, and managed using Microsoft Excel (Microsoft Corporation). Each researcher will download the results from their database searches from independent databases and will combine the results together across researchers. An initial deduplication of titles and DOIs will be performed before beginning the initial review process and again at each subsequent stage.

Reporting results / Analysis of the evidence

Newly added keywords and search terms from the initial search will be clearly identified as they are included and reported in table form. Papers found from our initial and primary searches will be reported in table form. Following the title and abstract screening, full-text articles will be reviewed. Any discrepancies between reviewers will be recorded and resolved. Inter-rater agreement will be assessed at the initial search stage and at each stage thereafter and will be reported in table form either in the supplemental materials or the main document. The Data Extraction Book from full-text article review will be made available. Those data will include sample size and characteristics, study location, sample country, non-apartness constructs of focus as independent and/or dependent variables, other independent or dependent variables, human apartness construct definitions, behavioral descriptions and functional category of human apartness construct, description of the behavior-environment relationship of human apartness construct, measures employed for assessing human apartness, and critiques of measure(s) if discussed in the article. We also plan to report our primary search results in text form by a publication, with tables that will be made available with the manuscript.

Presentation of the results We plan to report our primary search results in text form by a publication, with tables that will be made available with the manuscript. Search strategy flow diagram will be presented, following PRISMA guidelines. Other graphical presentation of data will be guided by results following the search.

Language restriction English.

Country(ies) involved United States.

Keywords loneliness, isolation, apartness, avoidant, fear of intimacy, solitude, disconnection, contextual behavioral science.

Dissemination plans Manuscript, conference, and data will be shared upon request with members of the scientific community.

Contributions of each author

Author 1 - Wesley Malvini - Author 1 is study lead and director and conceptualized and designed the review, provided guidance to other authors, and did the majority of the writing.

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Author 2 - Jessica Criddle - The author provided expertise in review methodology, contextual behavioral science, and protocol creation. The author also contributed content, literature sources, and editing.

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Author 3 - Jon-Patric Veal - Author 3 assisted author 1 with conceptualizing the study objectives, original writing, source review, and editing.

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Author 5 - David Perkins - Author 5 is the guarantor of this project, providing expert doctoral level guidance, and resolving all disagreements on protocol methodology.

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