

**UNDERSTANDING AN EPIDEMIC DURING A PANDEMIC:
A RELOOK AT WORK LONELINESS IN TIME OF COVID-19**

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Introduction

A recent Gallup poll indicated that approximately half of US employees are fully working from home due to imposed changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Hickman & Saad, 2020), and worldwide, 136 countries have implemented some form of remote work in their public organizations (Paskov, 2020). This unprecedented shift has become a major force influencing millions of employees around the world, who have started to work from home with scant lead-time, in virtual settings, deprived of face-to-face interactions. These dramatic changes in work practices are likely to have a number of outcomes for employees (Kniffin et al., 2020), some positive, some negative. We are particularly interested in one of those possible negative outcomes: work loneliness, which refers to the negative emotional state that arises when an employee feels that his or her affiliation needs are not being met by their organization (Ozcelik and Barsade, 2018).

Work loneliness is important because when people feel lonely at work, they are less approachable, less affectively committed to their organization, and ultimately, perform worse than their less lonely colleagues (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). Hence, identifying the factors that trigger work loneliness during this unique time of societal sudden organizational isolation due to the pandemic, and subsequently developing an understanding about how employees can bounce back from work loneliness upon returning to their physical workplace after this period, is central to maintaining employee well-being and performance. Moreover, exploring these factors that can trigger, mitigate, and buffer work loneliness addresses an important ongoing concern for organizations, considering that, even before the pandemic, 61% of Americans could be classified as feeling lonely (Nemecek, 2020). Thus, in this study, we attempt to understand the factors exacerbating or attenuating an epidemic that began much before the COVID-19 pandemic: what the former U.S. Surgeon General has called the loneliness epidemic (Murthy, 2017).

Conceptual Background on Loneliness

Loneliness is a relational construct comprised of a complex set of feelings that occur when a person's intimate and social needs are not met (Cacioppo et al., 2006). It is an aversive psychological state, and not a trait, meaning that people can feel *more* or *less* lonely over time. Because of its relational nature, work loneliness has to do with how employees seek connections with others when they feel deprived of close relationships (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018).

Prolonged isolation in this pandemic period could increase the likelihood of work loneliness because of employees' reduced ability to receive non-verbal cues in work interactions. Much of meaning in daily communication comes from non-verbal cues, such that lack of face-to-face communication with coworkers may create ambiguities and misunderstandings (Mehrabian, 1981). Experiencing misunderstandings in work interactions when deprived of non-verbal cues may increase employees' concerns of interpersonal rejection by others (Hallowell, 1999), a major trigger for loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2006).

Once triggered, per the regulatory loop model of loneliness, it can become a self-perpetuating process (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009). When people feel their relational needs are not met, that context makes them feel lonely and increases their need to feel more

psychologically protected and secure (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009). As a result, lonelier employees become more vigilant and defensive (Weiss, 1973), reducing their capacity even further to create meaningful social interactions. Thus, employees in social isolation may get drawn into hard-to-break cycles, becoming increasingly vigilant and self-defensive in work relationships (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Weiss, 1973).

Research Questions

The context under which loneliness intensifies—or dissipates—is unknown. Because loneliness is a subjective experience, an employee who works alone, or is socially isolated, will not necessarily feel lonely (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). Indeed, research on the trajectory of loneliness in everyday life during COVID-19 (Luchetti et al., 2020) suggests that some adults have remarkable resilience when coping with social isolation, which buffers them from feeling lonely. Thus, employees may be capable of not only breaking the loop of loneliness (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009), but also preventing themselves from entering this loneliness loop.

Based on the above, this study aims to research the following questions: First, which factors enhance employees' capacity to *meet their relational needs*, helping them feel less work loneliness in the social isolation of COVID-19. Second, considering that loneliness triggers a dysfunctional psychological and behavioral loop that makes rising out of loneliness difficult (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006; Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009), we examine what factors predict employees' capacity to *break the loop of loneliness and thus bounce back after social isolation*.

Theory

Drawing on the conservation of resources theory (COR) (Hobfoll, Shrom, & Golembiewski, 2000) we suggest that, when employees face obstacles while fulfilling interpersonal needs at work, i.e., a “resource loss,” the temporary loneliness that is activated will lead them to seek to expand and replenish resources that help fulfill these needs, i.e., seek “resource gains.” COR theory suggests that if people are able to effectively replenish their resources, harmful stressors may be attenuated or halted (Hobfoll et al., 2000). Supporting these views, recent research (Luchetti et al., 2020) has shown that drawing on resources such as social support can prevent temporary loneliness from turning into an established sentiment.

Accordingly, we examine a set of resources — at the *individual* and *contextual* levels — which we predict will help to keep a temporary state of loneliness from turning into a maladaptive established sentiment at work. At the individual level we examine dispositional, motivational, and behavioral factors that will enhance employees' psychological resources, enabling them to better interact and connect with their coworkers amid social isolation, and thus reduce their falling into dysfunctional loops if they are lonely at work. For example, we predict that more *extraverted* employees will be more capable of initiating social interactions with coworkers, as extraversion is associated with higher perceived available support, enacted support, and social network characteristics (Swickert, Rosentreter, Hittner & Mushrush, 2002). Motivationally, an employees' *prosocial motivation*, the degree to which they want to protect and promote the welfare of others (Grant, 2008), is predicted to increase this employee's potential to connect with coworkers and thus is expected to help preventing loneliness during COVID-19 social isolation. Similarly, at the behavioral level, we predict that employees' *helping behaviors* and *tendency to seek help from coworkers* (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002) will function as a behavioral resource enhancing their potential to avoid or break dysfunctional cycles related to loneliness.

At the contextual level, we predict that the helping norms and the emotional cultures of companionate love and anger in an employees' work groups will relate their psychological resources that will allow them to enhance or resist cycles of loneliness. In work groups where employees are expected and encouraged to help each other through *stronger helping norms* (Naumann & Ehrhart, 2011), we predict there will be more relational opportunities and resources for employees to connect with their coworkers, despite social isolation. A stronger *emotional culture of companionate love*, characterized by caring, compassion and tenderness in an employee's work group (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014), is also predicted to increase employees' capacity to reach out to each other to fulfill their relational needs (Hakan & Ozelik, 2018), making the development of an established sentiment of loneliness at work less likely when employees are socially isolated. Last, in a *stronger emotional culture of anger*, where expressions of irritation, annoyance, anger, grumpiness, and frustration are more acceptable (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014), employees will be more hesitant to seek to fulfill their relational needs as a result of self-protection, and we predict will be related to greater work loneliness.

Method

To investigate these factors underlying virtual work and loneliness in the time of COVID-19, we are conducting a multilevel time-lagged field study of a large public municipality. We invited 1199 employees across about 195 work groups to participate in the Time 1 survey, which took place during the COVID-19 period of social isolation. We focus mainly on employees who have worked solely from home during this time-period, but have for comparisons in the sample, employees who divided their time between working virtually and in their physical workplace, and those who worked only in their physical organization during this time-period. In this Time 1 survey, we have measured all the variables we described above, and this addresses our first research question: Which factors enhance employees' capacity to *meet their relational needs* in social isolation?. This survey also included various control and moderating variables that may affect employees' experiences during the COVID-19 period, such as how many people live with them, whether they have a designated workspace at home, and how concerned they are with getting sick with COVID-19. We have measured work loneliness via a modified UCLA Loneliness Scale, adapted for work (Ozelik & Barsade, 2018).

Data collection is ongoing; and we have recently completed collecting the Time 1 data. We will be collecting Time 2 data in a few months, from both employees and their supervisors when these remote employees return to their physical organization. This will allow us to examine our second research question: What factors predict employees' capacity to break the loop of loneliness and thus bounce back after social isolation?

In conclusion, our study aims to improve our understanding about individual and contextual resources that can prevent a socially isolated employee's temporary loneliness from turning into an established sentiment of loneliness, which will lead to negative work outcomes (Ozelik & Barsade, 2008). By honing in on these factors, the loneliness epidemic does not have to be a side effect of the social isolation "treatment" for the COVID-19 pandemic.

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