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The Impact of Experiential Avoidance on Vulnerable Disclosure, Perceived Responsiveness, and Social Connection

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Introduction

Loneliness, comprised of perceived social connection and social isolation, can have a severe negative impact on one’s physical and mental health. Understanding its complexities can assist in addressing these harmful consequences. In particular, the aspect of social connection can be understood through the interpersonal model of intimacy which posits that connection forms as a function of reciprocal vulnerable disclosure and perceived responsiveness. Experiential avoidance may complicate the process of the vulnerable disclosure required to develop social connection as sharing emotional information about oneself can result in discomfort that individuals avoid. Despite this theoretical connection, the relationship between experiential avoidance and vulnerable self-disclosure and its subsequent effect on social connection has yet to be explored in an experimental setting. The resulting analysis has both psychological and sociological implications as social connection is imperative to mental wellbeing and effective societal functioning.
Literature Review

Social Connection

As social creatures, social connection plays a fundamental role in people’s physical, mental, and emotional health. From an evolutionary standpoint, social connection improves an individual’s chance of survival (Holt-Lunstad, 2021). Feelings of social connectedness and healthy relationships with others can also serve a protective purpose when it comes to the body’s response to stressful situations and environments (Hostinar, 2015). Social connection is imperative when combating loneliness, a prevalent issue in today’s society that can lead to premature death as it has a similar impact on mortality risk to smoking (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Typically viewed through the lens of social isolation, the quantity of social relationships has received significant empirical investigation (Beller & Wagner, 2018). While social isolation can be quantitatively measured, the qualitative nature of social connection requires more complex methods of interpretation (Dahlberg, 2007).

Social connection can be understood through the interpersonal model of intimacy which details a reciprocal process involving mutual vulnerable disclosure between two individuals in which the sharer’s disclosure is met with what they perceive to be a validating response (Reis & Shaver, 1988). This disclosure typically involves the sharer’s personal emotions and goes beyond sharing factual information or events (Laurenceau et al., 1998). (could fit FI here). This can prove to be difficult for some as expressing vulnerable information about oneself can bring about uncomfortable feelings and thoughts. When someone consistently avoids engaging with such discomfort, they are engaging in experiential avoidance, which may complicate the process of vulnerable self-disclosure.

Experiential Avoidance
Experiential avoidance is classified as an avoidance of thoughts, feelings, and other situations that result in any form of distress (Hayes et al., 2004). It is manifested through potentially harmful coping behaviors enacted to escape or mediate what is perceived to be a negative experience in an attempt to protect oneself with many of these coping mechanisms only resulting in temporary relief (Kingston et al., 2014). Experiential avoidance can become problematic when the avoidance or coping mechanisms begin to interfere with an individual’s daily life and relationships (Kashdan et al., 2006). When it comes to social connection, high levels of experiential avoidance may deter an individual from partaking in the vulnerable disclosure necessary for the development of social intimacy required in the dyadic process involved in the interpersonal model of intimacy. To investigate this, we conducted an experiment in which participants had the opportunity to engage in vulnerable self-disclosure with a trained research assistant. We hypothesized that high levels of experiential avoidance would result in significantly lower levels of social connection throughout the experiment. Further, we hypothesized that individuals reporting high level of experiential avoidance would engage in less vulnerable self-disclosure and would view others’ responses as less effective.

**Method**

**Participants**

The original study recruited undergraduate students from the midwestern and central regions of the United States. 81 individuals participated in the experiment, including 55 women, 22 men, and four nonbinary individuals. Of these participants, 66 were students from Bowling Green State University, and 15 were students at Morehead State University. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 38 with an average age of 19.88 years ($SD = 3.41$). Given the opportunity to type in their own racial identity, 67 participants reported their race as White, 5 as Black/African-American, and 9 as other/unknown.
American, 3 as Asian, 5 as Biracial/Multiracial, and 1 as Hispanic. Five participants reported their ethnicity as Hispanic or Latino with 76 participants reporting their ethnicity as Not Hispanic or Latino.

**Measures**

To measure experiential avoidance, participants’ scores on the Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (BEAQ) were collected. The BEAQ is an abridged version of the Multidimensional Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (MEAQ) that includes 15 items in all six fields of characteristics of experiential avoidance. The BEAQ was completed by participants before engaging in the closeness-generating task in this experiment. The Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS) was used to measure participants’ level of discomfort with intimacy in relationships. The participant responds to these items using a scale from 1 to 5 pertaining to the extent to which a particular item applies to them. Vulnerability was measured after participants completed 10 questions and again after all 20 questions in the conversation task through a questionnaire that was designed to gauge how vulnerable the participant felt they were being with the research assistant. Similarly, responsiveness was measured at these same timepoints using a questionnaire that asked questions pertaining to how responsive the research assistant was according to the participant. In order to measure participants’ feelings of closeness with research assistants, the study utilized the CS-RA6 which consists of a 6-item Likert scale that involves items pertaining to the participants’ perceived level of social connectedness with the research assistant. This was completed before and after the closeness-generating task within this experiment.

**Procedure**

Participants met with a research assistant and signed an informed consent document after having it read aloud to them. Participants were then asked to complete a demographics survey,
the FIS, the BEAQ, and the CS-RA6 in order to measure fear of intimacy, experiential avoidance, and feelings of closeness with the research assistant prior to engaging in the conversation task. This task consisted of 20 questions designed to prompt vulnerable self-disclosure with a gradual increase in the amount of vulnerability elicited from the questions. After the first 10 questions, participants reported how vulnerable they felt they were answering these questions and how responsive they felt the research assistant was to their answers using the corresponding questionnaires. After answering the next 10 questions of the conversation task, participants were then asked to complete the CS-RA6 once again along with the vulnerability and responsiveness questionnaires. After data was collected, a Pearson correlation coefficient was conducted along with a mediation analysis using Model 6 of the Hayes Process Macro in SPSS.

Results

The average BEAQ score was 48.52 ($SD = 12.45$). The average vulnerability score at timepoint 1 was 53.51 ($SD = 8.52$), and the average vulnerability score at timepoint 2 was 57.94 ($SD = 8.80$). Responsiveness scores at timepoint 1 averaged at 62.33 ($SD = 7.31$), and responsiveness at timepoint 2 had an average score of 65.90 ($SD = 4.44$). FIS scores averaged at 81.80 ($SD = 23.09$). The average CS-RA6 score at timepoint 1 was 24.44 ($SD = 6.25$). At timepoint 2, the average CS-RA6 score was 29.77 ($SD = 5.61$).

A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to assess the relationships between variables. There was an insignificant negative correlation between experiential avoidance and vulnerable disclosure at timepoint 1, $r(63) = -.087, p = .491$. There was also an insignificant negative correlation between experiential avoidance and responsiveness at timepoint 1, $r(38) = -.139, p = .393$. There was found to be an insignificant negative correlation between experiential avoidance
and vulnerability at timepoint 2, $r(64) = -.159, p = .203$. There was also an insignificant correlation between experiential avoidance and responsiveness at timepoint 2, $r(38) = .056, p = .675$. There was an insignificant negative correlation between experiential avoidance and social connection at timepoint 1, $r(79) = -.201, p = .073$, and an insignificant correlation between experiential avoidance and social connection at timepoint 2, $r(79) = .027, p = .812$. There was a significant positive correlation between experiential avoidance and fear of intimacy, $r(78) = .434, p < .001$. There was also a significant negative correlation between fear of intimacy and vulnerability at timepoint 2, $r(63) = -.385, p = .002$. There was a significant positive correlation between vulnerability at timepoint 2 and change in social connection, $r(64) = .431, p < .001$.

Using Model 6 of the Hayes Process Macro in SPSS, the total effect of the mediation analysis model was discovered to be insignificant, $b=.042, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.38, 0.12], p = .30$. The direct effect of experiential avoidance on change in social connectedness was also found to be insignificant, $b=.065, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.02, 0.15], p=.12$. An indirect effect of experiential avoidance on change in social connectedness through fear of intimacy was insignificant, $b=-0.005, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.04, 0.05]$, as was an indirect effect through vulnerable disclosure at timepoint 2, $b=0.005, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.03, 0.04]$. An indirect effect through both fear of intimacy and vulnerable disclosure respectively was found to be significant, $b=-0.0215, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.05, -0.003]$, indicating that fear of intimacy and vulnerable disclosure serially mediate the relationship between experiential avoidance and social connectedness. This analysis is detailed in Figure 1.
Discussion

The results of the mediation analysis showed that experiential avoidance had no significant direct effect on change in feelings of social connection in this study on its own, but an indirect effect did exist when fear of intimacy and vulnerable disclosure at timepoint 2 are examined as mediators. These findings indicate that any existing relationship between experiential avoidance and social connection is complex and has multiple factors at play. Indirect effects involving either fear of intimacy or vulnerable disclosure as a mediator were also found to be insignificant. This underlines the implication that both fear of intimacy and vulnerable disclosure are required as mediators of experiential avoidance for a significant change in social connectedness.
Further exploration of experiential avoidance and social connection could produce differing results in more diverse sample sizes and demographics, as the majority of the sample at hand consisted of people who reported themselves as white and female. For example, recruiting participants from multiple different schools or regions throughout the U.S. could have differing implications for college students in the United States as most participants in this study came from Bowling Green State University. A larger sample size with a greater age range could provide data pertaining to different age groups and be applicable to a wider range of individuals within society. This procedure could also be repeated with participants of different nationalities in order to collect data outside of the United States.

The serial mediation of fear of intimacy and vulnerable disclosure has both psychological and sociological implications. Studies surrounding different factors and influences on social connection can assist in discovering potential barriers to more effective social functioning and addressing problems impacting social connection at the source. Understanding loneliness in the individual can help understand how loneliness presents itself in larger social groups. It may prove valuable to investigate how socialization in earlier life stages and onward can influence different mediators of social connection, along with how concepts such as trauma or psychopathology impact experiential avoidance, vulnerable disclosure, and social connection.


process: The importance of self-disclosure, partner disclosure, and perceived partner responsiveness in interpersonal exchanges. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 74*(5), 1238–1251. [https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.5.1238](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.5.1238)