

# Investigating Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Conceptual Analysis of Thwarted Belongingness, Loneliness, and Social Isolation

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The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has brought unprecedented challenges to global populations since its outbreak in December 2019. Given the strict quarantine mandates, many researchers and health experts have been concerned about the unknown immediate and long-term psychological effects of physical distancing. This article investigates this phenomenon by evaluating the constructs thwarted belongingness, social isolation, and loneliness through the method of conceptual analysis. First, linguistic attention is given to the clarification of conceptual overlap, vagueness, and inconsistencies in construct meaning and application. Second, phenomenological descriptions are used to examine the congruity between psychological constructs and lived experience during the pandemic. Third, the novel inclusion of identity and the significance of space are applied to ascertain the contextual dimensions and mechanisms of quarantine measures and physical distancing. Lastly, this article concludes by discussing the valuable role that philosophy and conceptual analysis have in the field of psychology and COVID-19 research.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, mental health research, conceptual analysis, philosophical psychology, thwarted belongingness

Depuis son éclosion, la maladie à coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) apporte des défis sans précédent. Les mandats de quarantaine stricts ont inquiétés de nombreux experts sur les effets psychologiques immédiats et à long terme inconnus de la distanciation physique. Afin d'étudier cela, cet article évalue les construits d'appartenance contrariée, isolement social et solitude avec une analyse conceptuelle. Une attention linguistique est accordée à la clarification du chevauchement conceptuel, l'imprécision et les incohérences dans la définition et l'application des construits. Aussi, la congruité entre les construits psychologiques et l'expérience vécue pendant la pandémie sont examinés avec des descriptions phénoménologiques. La nouvelle inclusion de l'identité et l'importance de l'espace est appliquée pour définir les dimensions contextuelles et les mécanismes des mesures de quarantaine et de distanciation physique. Finalement, l'importance de la philosophie et de l'analyse conceptuelle dans le domaine de la psychologie et de la recherche sur la COVID-19 est discutée.

*Mots-clés :* COVID-19, santé mentale, analyse conceptuelle, psychologie philosophique, appartenance contrariée

## Introduction

Although coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) research can be appreciated for its rapid implementation, caution should be given to the quality and reproducibility of studies on the immediate and long-term psychological effects of the pandemic (Demkowicz et al., 2021). As publication graphs indicate, the number of health-related articles has increased exponentially since January 2020, with many journals offering higher acceptance rates and fast-tracking through the editorial process (Else, 2020;

Gustot, 2020; Kambhampati et al., 2020). As of March 2021, approximately 3.55 million COVID-19 articles have been published, equating to roughly 9,726 per day (Conley & Johnson, 2021). Considering the complexity and multifactorial nature of an unprecedented historical event like COVID-19, many in the research community have stressed the need for greater precaution and critical reflection (Demkowicz et al., 2021; Gustot, 2020). As a unique global phenomenon, the multidimensional nature of COVID-19 has made it challenging to accurately study and measure mental health risks and outcomes (Gruber et al., 2021).

From the initial stages of research, priority must be given to definition and demarcation, which are used to isolate one variable from another. Thus far, researchers have given considerable attention to loneliness and related variables, including social

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isolation, physical distancing, and *thwarted belongingness*. According to Gratz et al. (2020), thwarted belongingness stems from “feeling disconnected from and lacking meaningful relationships with others” (p. 1141). However, Van Orden et al. (2012) define it as “an unmet need for social competence” (p. 2), and Raj et al. (2021) describe it as “a psychological state in which the need for social connectedness and the need for belongingness are not adequately met” (p. 2). Moreover, McCallum et al. (2021) define belongingness as “the need to belong, based on experiences of social interactions” (p. 2).

These definitions present inconsistencies that make it difficult to determine what precisely constitutes belongingness and its negation (i.e., thwartedness). In some of the aforementioned explanations, there is what is commonly referred to in philosophical terms as “circularity” or “circular definitions.” These can be viewed as problematic because such patterns break the *principle of clarity*. A circular definition occurs when the *definiens* (i.e., the meaning of “thwarted belongingness”) explicitly contains the *definiendum* (the term that is being explained) (Burgess, 2008). This means that the term being defined is being given to describe itself. With unclear definitions, the measured psychological or social phenomenon may not correspond with the language being used to represent it. In turn, the burden of interpretation then rests with the audience, who may misunderstand and misuse the research in future studies. According to Burgess, “circular definitions fail the informativeness norm about as badly as any definition possibly could” (p. 215).

Consequently, problems arise when expressing construct measures, as their meaning may be inconsistent or overlap with related variables. The inability to achieve mutual recognition between researchers has led to significant criticism over the validity, reproducibility, and replication of social scientific research. In the case of thwarted belongingness, the distinction between loneliness and social isolation is insufficiently demarcated in various research studies. For example, McCallum et al. (2021) describe loneliness as “a subjective feeling of having less social contact than one wants” (p. 2), while Gratz et al. (2020) define neither social isolation nor loneliness despite possible construct overlap. As Yanguas et al. (2018) claim, loneliness is a complex, multifactorial construct, and for these reasons, there have been many diverse definitions and reiterations of it from researchers over the years. According to Flake and Fried (2020),

If a target construct is not defined clearly at the outset of planning a study, the ambiguity in

what is being measured will make navigating all the future measurement decisions difficult, and many opportunities to exploit this ambiguity, knowingly or otherwise, will present themselves” (p. 460).

When researchers use vague constructs, especially to measure a highly complex global phenomenon with significant differences in factors such as infection rates, demographics, and quarantine measures, it leaves the data susceptible to numerous confounds. As psychological studies typically build on one another, a prospective risk of conceptual vagueness is a causal sequence of errors from researcher to researcher, which may be expressed through skewed results, misinterpretation, unsuccessful hypotheses, and research limitations.

However, in terms of scientific integrity and reliability, there has also been ongoing concern over the accuracy of psychological research study results (Aarts, 2015; Pashler & Harris, 2012; Stevens, 2017). During the “Replicability Crisis” that began in the early 2000s, an influx of researchers began questioning the accuracy of the methods and results of various scientific studies (Francis, 2012; Simmons et al., 2011; Vul et al., 2009). In 2015, a three-year research project attempted to replicate the findings of 100 studies in top-tier psychological journals (Open Science Collaborative, 2015). As the results indicated, the replications were statistically significant in only 39% of cases, while 61% failed to reproduce the original results. According to Freese and Peterson (2015), social psychology is at the centre of this concern, which can be attributed to the nature of the phenomena being studied and the methods being used to study them.

This article has developed to enhance conceptual clarity and phenomenological descriptions during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, it aligns with the recommendations provided by three fellow research teams in the psychological community. First, according to Demkowicz et al. (2021), “as the pandemic continues to evolve, we must take time to reflect on our initial research response and collectively consider how we can use this to strengthen ensuing COVID-19 mental health research and our response to future crises” (p. 1). Second, Carel et al. (2021) suggest that “phenomenological reflection on our experiences, on what we have gained and lost during the pandemic, can also lead to a renewed and deeper appreciation of what we had previously taken for granted” (p. 88). Third, Holmes et al. (2020) propose that if progress is to be made in COVID-related health research, the process “will require integration across disciplines and sectors” (p. 556). Based on these proposals, this article incorporates (1) critical

reflection on earlier COVID-19 research, (2) phenomenological considerations of lived experience during the pandemic, and (3) interdisciplinary critical psychological and philosophical research.

Focusing on the construct thwarted belongingness, relations and distinctions are drawn between social isolation and loneliness. With the novel inclusion of *identity* and what will be referred to as *the significance of space*, a Wittgensteinian conceptual analysis will be employed to elucidate the meaning and application of these concepts within the context of COVID-19. The basis for this analysis is most aptly described by Wittgenstein's (1958) description of *language games*:

For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that [ . . . ] And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail (§66).

Although thwarted belongingness has a relationship or kinship with social isolation and loneliness, they are not synonymous nor entirely divisible. Consequently, this leaves them in a linguistic and phenomenological “gray area.” This article sets out to better understand the similarities, differences, and contingencies of these concepts in relation to the pandemic. In doing so, this philosophical investigation should, as Hyman (1991) describes, “contribute to psychological science by extirpating conceptual confusions that have been woven into the fabric of empirical research” (p. 19).

### COVID-19 Health Risks

Since initial reports of the outbreak in December 2019, prevention methods have maintained an essential role in controlling infection rates. Though government and healthcare officials have prioritized the need for social isolation, new research has suggested that these measures may pose short and long-term mental health risks (Reger et al., 2020; Sher, 2020). As Usher et al. (2020) have indicated, isolation is a known cause of psychosocial problems, especially when individuals are subjected to prolonged exposure. During past global pandemics, researchers identified an increased risk of psychological distress and suicide (Cheung et al., 2008; Wasserman, 1992). In a research study conducted by Hawryluck et al. (2004) during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) pandemic (2002–2004), symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression were reported in 28.9% and 31.2% of participants, with longer quarantine measures associated with greater PTSD risk. Both the Spanish Flu (1918–1920) and the

SARS outbreak were associated with higher rates of psychological distress and suicide (Wasserman, 1992; Zortea et al., 2021).

However, unlike previous pandemics, COVID-19 has posed additional challenges through rapid transmissibility and ubiquitous infection rates via globalization and international travel (Su et al., 2021; Zalsman et al., 2020). Since the emergence of cases in Wuhan, China, in December of 2019 (Huang et al., 2020), the virus spread to nearly every country and territory in the world (Rostami et al., 2021), with over 21 million cases and nearly 800,000 deaths attributed to the virus as of August 16, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020a). Compared to more geographically isolated pandemics, COVID-19 caused immediate disruptions in global populations and economic markets (Kestha et al., 2021). With the onset of the virus and the heterogeneous differences in international rates and responses, it has been suggested that establishing connections and measuring variables between COVID-19 and mental health risk is challenging to determine (John et al., 2020; Zalsman et al., 2020). What has made the COVID-19 pandemic particularly deleterious for many individuals is the fact that mental health services were often unavailable in particular regions (World Health Organization, 2020b). Because of these significant disruptions, researchers should err on the side of caution when evaluating outcomes of the pandemic (Sher, 2020).

Given the extent of closures, lockdowns, restrictions, and cancellations, many individuals have experienced severe isolation and detachment from society (Ritchie et al., 2020), as well as from fundamental social units, including family, friends, peers, neighbours, and coworkers (Frenkel-Yosef et al., 2020; Holingue et al., 2020). This is particularly concerning from a public health standpoint, as studies have shown that loneliness and social isolation are associated with significant health risks (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006; Palgi et al., 2020; Zalsman et al., 2020), including poorer cognitive function (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014), sleep disturbances (Altena et al., 2020), depression (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Czeisler et al., 2020; Xiang et al., 2020), anxiety (Alzueta et al., 2021; Mertens et al., 2020; Thakur & Jain, 2020), PTSD (Brooks et al., 2020), self-harm (John et al., 2020), and suicide (Druss, 2020; Gunnell et al., 2020). These risks may be more significant during the COVID-19 pandemic, as valuable social and communal institutions such as schools, clubs, committees, organizations, and places of worship such as churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples have suspended in-person gatherings (McCallum et al., 2021; Reger et al., 2020). Many of these networks, communities, and activities are essential for coping,

stress relief, social cohesion, and overall well-being (Reger et al., 2020; Zalsman et al., 2020).

With drastic alterations to virtually all dimensions of modern life, Reger et al. (2020) have referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as “a perfect storm” in terms of adverse mental health outcomes (p. 1093). Mental health, according to the World Health Organization (2004), is “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (p. 12). With these dramatic changes in day-to-day life, most Americans have been unable to meet the social and leisure requirements necessary for sound mental health (Usher et al., 2020). In April 2020, 72% of the population indicated that they were experiencing either major or minor disruptions to their way of life (Kirzinger et al., 2020). Compared with pre-COVID mental health measures, McGinty et al. (2020) identified a significant increase in adverse mental health effects in the US. Given such outcomes, government and health officials must be mindful of the potential correlation between social isolation and psychological distress, especially when implementing strict and long-term social distancing and stay-at-home orders (Sher, 2020). According to Brooks et al. (2020), quarantine measures should only be used for as long as necessary, as ongoing isolation may contribute to unforeseeable long-term psychosocial problems.

#### **Gratz et al. (2020) on Social Isolation and Thwarted Belongingness**

In the study by Gratz et al. (2020), the researchers investigated how social isolation produced by stay-at-home orders and job loss were directly and indirectly correlated with depression and suicide. Specifically, the underlying mechanisms (i) thwarted belongingness, (ii) perceived burdensomeness, and (iii) loneliness were measured. For example, in the case of job loss, the researchers wanted to understand if suicide was correlated with (i), (ii), or (iii), or a combination of these factors. Two hypotheses were presented in the study. First, that increase in involuntary unemployment and social isolation would be positively correlated with suicide risk. Second, that social restrictions would be associated with greater feelings of thwarted belongingness and loneliness and thus lead to an increase in suicide risk. Furthermore, it was also expected that involuntary unemployment or job loss would equate to feelings of perceived burdensomeness, and therefore, correspond with increased suicide risk (Gratz et al., 2020). The researchers identified that the pandemic could potentially disrupt two dimensions of social cohesion. First, with COVID-19 restrictions and the threat of

unemployment and job loss, individuals may experience a growing concern for potential social isolation. This, in turn, could lead to a subsequent reduction in social ties and relationships. Second, with this increasing concern over unemployment and job loss, individuals may experience a dependency on others, which would lead to a conceivable increase in perceived burdensomeness rather than personal value (Gratz et al., 2020).

To conduct this study, the researchers focused on a cross-sectional design that measured the American population in a total of 45 states (Gratz et al., 2020). Using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform, a sample size of 500 individuals living in the United States completed the online self-report survey over 9 days between March 27, 2020 and April 5, 2020. With the MTurk online platform and model, individuals had the opportunity to participate in the research study for pay, and in this study, participants were given \$3.00 for completing the online survey. A total of four questionnaire rating scales were combined to explore variables such as recent job loss, stay-at-home order status, perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, loneliness, and suicide risk (Gratz et al., 2020). These subsections and scales included (i) experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, (ii) thwarted belongingness and burdensomeness (*The Interpersonal Needs Questionnaire*), (iii) loneliness and social isolation (*UCLA Loneliness Scale – version 3*), and (iv) depression symptoms (*The Depression Symptom Index – Suicide Subscale*). From the results of the scales, correlational measures were applied to identify the relationship between the identified variables and suicide risk.

The results provided partial support for the proposed hypotheses of the research team. However, given that job loss, unemployment, and perceived burdensomeness were a primary focus of the paper, the lack of an independent association was surprising. Though the researchers presented multiple hypotheses, only thwarted belongingness showed a unique association with suicide risk. As the results identified, it is not that social isolation is necessarily detrimental in and of itself, but that a more pervasive disconnection must be mediating the increased association with increased suicide risk (Gratz et al., 2020). Though it was not fully explained or defined in the paper, thwarted belongingness somehow negatively impacts social cohesion and connection (Gratz et al., 2020). This concept becomes more convoluted and uncertain when considering that “thwarted belongingness overlaps with loneliness,” although “it is a broader construct that also captures the nature and extent of support and reciprocal interpersonal relationships” (Gratz et al., 2020, p. 1141). However, that description is quite vague and

can be attributed to any number of variables and confounds, which is further complicated when considering the variance in COVID-related geographic and demographic factors.

Overall, there appeared to be a lack of conciseness when defining and explaining some of the operationalized variables in this study. Rather than simply presenting the variables and measuring them, it would have been advantageous to elaborate on them in order to understand their mechanisms of action (e.g., how thwarted belongingness decreases social cohesion and increases suicide risk when compared to loneliness). Specifically, greater elucidation of the possible distinctions and the similarities of social isolation, loneliness, and thwarted belongingness would improve opportunities for interpretation and replication of these findings in future research studies. Moreover, the research methodology employed various self-report measures on thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, loneliness, social isolation, and suicide, which may be particularly difficult to measure without professional psychological assessments. Given the complexity of these variables and the potential for conceptual and measure overlap, the addition of clinical interviewing could enhance the accuracy of the measures.

### Conceptual Analysis and Psychological Phenomena

A concern with COVID-19 research stems from potentially vague and overlapping concepts, making it difficult to fully grasp what is being measured or accounted for. In philosophical terms, it can be said that many researchers present constructs *prima facie* or “at/on first appearance” (Pring, 1982, p. 247). This outcome occurs when a researcher fails to adequately describe the construct and its meaning and mechanisms. According to Litwinski (1956), in psychological research, “we should avoid over hasty measurement of things which still lack conceptual clarity [. . .] Thus, the unifying concept of belongingness is distinct from, although connected with [. . .] various forms of integration or identification” (p. 131). Therefore, “thwarted” belongingness being the negation or privation of belongingness, infers the disintegration and disidentification of the aforementioned properties. However, Gratz et al. (2020) fail to demarcate the term from the potentially overlapping concepts of loneliness and social isolation, as these are “presupposed” when reading the article. Moreover, little acknowledgment is given to the interaction between concept and context. The results of the study provide research data, but the underlying meaning remains questionable in terms of what it represents and whether confounding factors were sufficiently controlled for.

According to Dallenbach (1953), conceptual vagueness in science often arises when the theoretical understanding of the measurement is lacking. Although an effect or phenomenon is being measured, the investigator, in failing to circumscribe its conceptual specificity, leaves the validity of the variable relationships susceptible to process or mechanism misattribution. As Toomela (2010) identifies, the employment of quantitative methods in psychology is inadequate for “answering questions about structures and processes that underlie observed behaviours” (p. 1). In contemporary psychological sciences, the use of quantitative methods often precedes consideration of the phenomenon and its context (Toomela, 2010). Because COVID-19 is such a complex global event, researchers should be particularly concerned with confounds and the implications of their measures. For this reason, conceptual analysis may be an underutilized tool for understanding the overall goal of the research being conducted. More specifically, as a method, conceptual analysis can be used to solidify accurate definitions, determine necessary and sufficient conditions, draw distinctions between related concepts, and evaluate underlying contextual factors (Glock, 2013; Racine, 2015). Primarily, the method aims to break down and deconstruct complex phenomena, measures, and concepts into concise linguistic components, which can then be used to explore meanings, contingencies, and interactions more effectively.

Wittgensteinian conceptual analysis would be the preferred form for psychological sciences, as it allows for interdisciplinary openness and the consideration of everyday phenomena (Glock, 2013; Racine, 2015). Because Wittgenstein’s approach is fundamentally anti-theoretical, it prioritizes the particularities of a given phenomenon, its constituent linguistic representations, and the circumstances in which we use it (Horwich, 2012). Consequently, the analysis is not subsumed by the abstraction of analytic theories and practices, but instead favours a reality-oriented approach fundamentally aware of contingency (Rorty, 1987). Instead of relying solely on a priori reasoning, which aligns with the analytic or Anglo-American philosophical tradition, the later works of Wittgenstein are rooted in a “common-sense” approach that is critically self-reflexive, meta-philosophically and meta-scientifically perceptive, and meticulously astute to detail (Glock, 2013).

Ushering in the ‘post-analytic turn’ in philosophy, Wittgenstein’s later thinking overcame many of the methodological constraints that relegated the discipline to limited topics and discussions (Bevir, 2011). Prior to Wittgenstein’s re-emergence at Cambridge University in 1929, “analytic philosophy was given a certain cast by the dogmas it inherited

from logical positivism. There was a sharp separation of philosophical analysis from empirical inquiry, [and] the sharp separation of the analytic from the normative” (Adel, 1972, p. 133). In its rigid, terse, and indoctrinated style, which prioritized a highly technical form of analysis, the analytic tradition furthered the discipline’s isolation from other subjects (Glover, 1988; Mišćević, 2006). Unlike more interdisciplinary and holistic approaches such as continental (i.e., critical theory, phenomenology, and existentialism) and postmodernism philosophy, known for integrating history, art, culture, and life-oriented concerns, analytic philosophers reinforced their identity through opposition to other forms of philosophy, which were viewed as less rigorous and reputable forms of philosophy (Norris, 2010). Because of its ‘essentialist’ view of what constitutes philosophy, the analytic tradition has often been regarded as contentious, dismissive, and at times, intolerant of other styles of philosophy. For this reason, the tradition has been criticized for its scholasticism, hair-splitting, and proverbial armchair intellectual concerns (Glover, 1988).

On the other hand, post-analytic philosophers began moving away from the perennial problems of philosophy that focused on transcendental and objective truths, certainty, essences, and unitary epistemic approaches. Instead, these thinkers started to engage with more dynamic, multidisciplinary concerns that prioritized contingency, utility, and social progress. For Wittgenstein, the clarification and determination of accurate descriptions of phenomena and concepts are the primary concerns of the philosopher. Rather than following in the scientists’ footsteps, the philosopher’s role should be devoted to elucidation and description rather than explanation and theorization. For Wittgenstein, the philosopher is not privy to a heightened epistemic stance that bestows them with the capacity to uncover ‘truths’ and ‘theories’ (Horwich, 2012). In terms of contingency, Rorty (1987) has suggested it is not possible to “step outside our skins—the traditions, linguistic and other, within which we do our thinking and self-criticism—and compare ourselves with something absolute” (p. 33). This has been a central weakness of the analytic tradition, which has traditionally fixated on absolutes, objective truths, and the soundness of argumentative claims.

In contrast, Wittgenstein’s later works identified that many of the central problems in philosophy and science are just ‘pseudo-problems’ that exist due to faulty patterns of language and conceptualization (Kuusela, 2013). In the field of psychology, Wittgensteinian conceptual analysis can assist researchers in determining more precise “operational definitions of [. . .] phenomena” and develop “quasi-

technical concepts to classify or illuminate particular theoretical issues” (Racine, 2015, p. 39). Wittgenstein understood that scientists and philosophers often run into similar problems through the application and misapplication of language:

A scientist says he pursues only empirical science or a mathematician only mathematics and not philosophy, but he is subject to the temptations of language like everyone; he is in the same danger as everyone else and must beware of it (as cited in Kuusela, 2013).

Similar to the criticisms posed by Litwinski (1956) and Dallenbach (1953) about vague concepts and measures, Wittgenstein (2009) also skeptically stated that “in psychology there are experimental methods and conceptual confusion” (§371). Wittgenstein was aware of the risks involved in studying psychological phenomena and mental states, and as such, conceptual analysis and linguistic clarification are methods that can be used to enhance the methodological misgivings of the sciences.

Two methods of Wittgensteinian conceptual analysis may play a particularly vital role in better understanding psychological concepts. The first is to analyze the application of the words themselves and their meaning. According to Wittgenstein (1958), “we do not analyze a phenomenon (e.g., thinking) but a concept (e.g., that of thinking), and hence the application of a word” (§383). Our language is the basis for the concepts and constructs we use to represent the things, events, interactions, and effects in the world. Methodologically, Wittgensteinian conceptual analysis can assist researchers in comparing central properties and features of variables, which can be drawn out and isolated through the employment of analogies, disanalogies, inferences, and exclusionary criteria (Glock, 2010). Second, as Wittgenstein (1958) also notes, “concepts lead us to make investigations. They are the expression of our interest and direct our interest” (§570). Therefore, the way one establishes a concept and uses it is critical in determining “what differences we notice [. . .] and what sort of things we can take an interest in” (Glock, 2010, p. 91). This method allows researchers to reflect on the initial pragmatic application of the construct they wish to measure, as well as the contextual factors underlying its use.

### **An Overview of Space**

The incomplete conceptualization of belongingness during COVID-19 can be partially attributed to the neglect of factors such as identity, embodiment, and space, as well as their dynamic interactions. Although belongingness may be tied to a lack of “meaningful relationships” (Gratz et al., 2020), philosophers such

as Hannah Arendt would find this explanation incomplete. According to Arendt (1990), shared, communal space is where individuals engage in political and public affairs. Throughout history, in this space, individuals “appear and be real only when others saw them, judged them, remembered them” (Arendt, 1990, p. 31). To trace the etymology of the concept of space being described, one must think of the Greek word *agora* (Ἀγορά), which refers to “gathering, mass” or “gathered together” (Beekes, 2010).

When assembling, individuals would have the opportunity to discuss the collective duties and responsibilities of the city-state. These public affairs can only be manifested in set ‘political’ activities, and when they are absent, a person or citizen becomes detached from higher-order socio-political goals. Unlike the ancient Greeks, modern individuals have experienced a blurring of the household (*oikia*) and the public sphere (*polis*) or “the common world” (Arendt, 1958, p. 58). With this private–public demarcation, “the ancient Greeks located all activities concerned exclusively with survival, the needs of the body, and biological necessity in the household” (Pitkin, 1998, p. 11). However, what has since happened in the modern world is a phenomenon that Arendt refers to as “the rise of the social” (Pitkin, 1998, p. 10). This totalizing force, rather than conferring freedom, reduces individuals to the purely economic and household concerns of the *oikia*. Consequently, within the social sphere, individuals become enmeshed in the dual-sided nature of labour and consumption (Arendt, 1958). In the modern age, the lower-order activity of labour, which provides the sustenance, nourishment, and material necessary for life, has become the dominant form of human expression (Arendt, 1958).

Temporally, days and schedules are typically oriented towards employment, and upon completion, individuals then engage in the maintenance of ‘microeconomic’ concerns of the *oikia*. The social sphere reduces human interactions to instrumentality, wherein “the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance” (Arendt, 1958, p. 45–46). Although individuals may feel they have greater self-determination within the modern world, much of this is founded on the illusion of choice. Increasingly, the autonomy that persons have both individually and collectively is in terms of their occupation, leisure, and entertainment, which all fall under the category of labour-consumption. For Arendt,

the last stage of the laboring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though

individual life had actually been submerged in the overall life process of the species . . . the still individually sensed pain and trouble of living, and acquiesce in a dazed, “tranquilized,” functional type of behaviour (p. 322).

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals have been confronting such a reality, as the notions of “public” and “space” have ultimately vanished. Although modern people have shifted from Arendt’s idealized political reality, quarantine measures, lockdowns, restrictions, and social distancing have made it near impossible to exist in what Arendt (1990) refers to as the “space of appearances.” According to Marquez (2012), “a space of appearance is a setting where individuality emerges from self-disclosure among equals . . . Other spaces where visibility and its absence help individuals constitute selves, form subjects, or generate power can be readily imagined” (p. 7). In this “absence,” individuals not only feel as though they are not connected to one another. However, in a more holistic phenomenological sense, they also cannot engage in “collective action” or what Marquez (2012) refers to as “Arendtian power” (p. 7). When free to act, humanity has the capacity to bring forth innovation and change in the world with “startling unexpectedness” through the condition of *natality* (Arendt, 1958, p. 246). In the public sphere, the initiation of action represents potentiality and unpredictability akin to the process of “birth” (Arendt, 1958, p. 9). This capacity for creation and change has the power to disrupt “the inexorable, automatic course . . . of daily life” (Arendt, 1958, p. 246). During the COVID-19 pandemic, this capacity for *natality* has been significantly compromised.

When we think of space, Lefebvre (2016) argues that our discussion of space should not be divided from the physical, mental, and social fields, but as a ‘unitary theory’ governed by continuous interaction (p. 11). As Lefebvre states, “social relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space. Their underpinning is spatial” (p. 404). During the pandemic, it can be claimed that the inaccessibility of space has infringed on natural rights and desires for self-expression and action. Our ability to ‘be human’ in a social sense is thus reduced when physical space is removed. As Arendt (1990) identifies, political freedom is given in “deeds and words which are meant to appear” and “whose very existence hinges on [this] appearance” (p. 92). With the rise of quarantine restrictions and physical distancing, there has been a twofold disappearance in space and interaction. Extending Arendt’s concern for political life, COVID-19 has limited our already seemingly diminished

capacity to manifest both collective and individual interests.

Instead of being able to express plurality, which Arendt (1958) defines as “a basic condition of action” (p. 175), individuals during the pandemic have been considerably limited by deterministic factors. For Arendt, mutual recognition in the space of appearances is necessary for human differentiation because it allows individuals to express uniqueness and orient their identity. With the minimization of space and the erosion of shared intersubjective experiences, individuals end up losing their relatedness to others and the world around them. Belongingness, in the Arendtian conception of higher-order human affairs, represents not only connection but also contribution through action, duty, and connection to the common good (Arendt, 1958).

### **A Conceptual Analysis of Identity and its Interaction with Space**

Taking a more liberal account of identity, space, and action beyond the political-public sphere, this Wittgensteinian analysis evaluates the linguo-conceptual conceptual basis of thwarted belongingness and investigates its phenomenological dimensions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As this type of examination has yet to be conducted by other researchers, it is mainly exploratory and aims to establish possibilities for future multidisciplinary research. This analysis should, as Demkowicz et al. (2021) have claimed, help to increase limited qualitative research and clarify whether determined measures and constructs assess “what they are meant to be assessing” (p. 5). Methodologically, this approach deconstructs and explicates thwarted belongingness and uses *contrast categories* such as social isolation and loneliness. Following the later Wittgensteinian approach to conceptual analysis, prioritization is given to common language, clarity, and the connection between meaning and usage. For this intended purpose, *common language* preserves practicality and the rejection of obscure, technical language in favour of more accurate linguistic and phenomenological experiences. This aim aligns with the intent of being able to “experience the meaning” of words and concepts (Wittgenstein, 1958, §213). By employing analogy and reconsidering context, it is possible to approximate the meaning and usage of terms and concepts that apply to lived experience. Unlike the early analytic philosophers, this anti-essentialist approach is more concerned with a pragmatic understanding than one purely theoretical in nature.

According to Wittgenstein (1958), the role of the philosopher “is to bring back words from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (Wittgenstein,

1958, §116). By “metaphysical,” Wittgenstein refers to the belief that the meaning of a word logically connects to the *essence* of the thing being referenced. Instead, Wittgenstein asserts that the meaning of a word is constituted in daily use, and its function, therefore, is contextually contingent. As Read (2014) explains, “philosophy is about trying to make sense of things. (Trying to weave uses that we do not (as yet) find our feet within our existing grasp/use of our concepts)” (p. 64).

Based on the outcomes of the study, Gratz et al. (2020) claim that “it is not loneliness specifically but a broader sense of disconnection and absence of meaningful relationships that accounts for the relation of stay-at-home orders to greater suicide risk” (p. 1145). In the case of loneliness, an individual may feel lonely or psychologically distant from others even when they are physically or proximally present. Compared to social isolation, the sense or feeling of loneliness is bound to a more internal, subjective state rather than one directly tied to the presence or absence of another person. You can be lonely while being either around or away from other people. On the other hand, you cannot be socially isolated when surrounded by others, which implies a more objective determination than loneliness. Specifically, social isolation infers one’s removal from the physical presence of others. Based on the research of Gratz et al. (2020), social isolation itself is not necessarily bound to a positive or negative experience or outcome (i.e., depression or suicidal thoughts). It is not the physical distancing itself that leads to a particular adverse emotion or attitude, but that social isolation can contribute to more complex social consequences (i.e., thwarted belongingness). This means that the interaction between physical absence and thwarted belongingness is more dynamic and iterative than implied by the researchers. One may experience social isolation, which then leads to thwarted belongingness, which may then also lead to (i) loneliness, (ii) depression, and (iii) risk of suicide.

With stay-at-home orders, individuals may long for the opportunity to be around others and experience daily interactions, but due to mandated physical-proximal restrictions, these rights have been temporarily negated or prohibited. In this state, individuals may experience thwarted belongingness, as suggested by Gratz et al. (2020); however, it can also be claimed that the phenomenon has a far more complex and pervasive mechanism than social cohesion and collective interaction. Specifically, to understand the meaning of thwarted belongingness, one needs to consider the role that identity and self-concept have in conjunction with the significance of space. Without adequately understanding how social isolation leads to thwarted belongingness and why



and elucidation. Consequently, it becomes difficult to understand what the measurements stand for, especially in the context of a complex social phenomenon, which in turn, brings forth challenges for possible COVID-related interventions and recommendations, as well as replication of the findings in future research studies.

In examining social isolation and thwarted belongingness during COVID-19, individuals have experienced social restrictions that have denied them the right and opportunity to live as they intend. Specifically, the principle of self-determination, which is a staple in a liberal democratic society, has been sacrificed to mitigate the spread of the virus. Many individuals have found this particularly challenging during the pandemic. This may be why many individuals have challenged social gathering restrictions. *Prima facie*, this appears to be a problem of social cohesion and desire for a collective community, but underneath this appearance, there are many personal concerns also taking place. Self-determination and intentional actions enable individuals to perform, express, and embody their identity and construct and reinforce a self-concept. Thwarted belongingness as a phenomenon does not just imply a hindrance to social cohesion and one's identity in a collective sense (e.g., as a student studying  $x$  at university  $y$  or as an employee at company  $z$ ), but also to one's self-perception and self-value (e.g., I am  $x$  and I do  $y$ , and I also feel  $z$  about myself and my life).

Unfortunately, most studies and researchers have not fully explored the implications of thwarted belongingness, especially the confounds, mediators, and moderators that influence the construct's measurement. Beyond belongingness, researchers should consider how social isolation from COVID-19 restrictions may inhibit actions and behaviours that, when measured collectively, are crucial in forming identity and the manifestation of roles that signify who we are as persons. Underlying this model is the significance of space, as, without access to particular environments, necessary *physical-proximal interactions* and connections cannot occur. In their absence, individuals during COVID-19 have moved and connected less with their physical surroundings. 'Spaces' are fundamental physical locations that allow us to actualize or enact our social roles and functions through action and interaction. Thwarted belongingness is not limited to collective belongingness, but also deeper existential belongingness that occurs between an individual and their relationship to the world.

This personal belongingness infers that one accepts identity and self-concept in fundamental existential

terms (i.e., I am  $x$  and I do  $a, b, c$ , which bring my life meaning). If these vital actions are negated and an individual cannot engage in self-determination, then the sense of thwarted belongingness is not just in terms of others, but a disconnect from oneself and the world. For example, in finding oneself unemployed and unable to fulfill previously satisfying roles, an individual may question who they are and the direction of their life. COVID-19, in many ways, has disrupted dimensions of life that provide individuals with 'orienting effects.' According to Grondin et al. (2020), throughout the pandemic, individuals have experienced a loss of "temporal landmarks," which led to distortions in the perception of psychological time (p. 6). In a study by Escolà-Gascón et al. (2020), the researchers found that *depersonalization* and *derealization* were two types of perceptual disturbances that increased the most after individuals experienced social isolation. According to Ciaunica et al. (2022), depersonalization is "a common dissociative experience characterized by distressing feelings of being detached or 'estranged' from one's self and body," while derealization refers to a dissociative experience from "the world" or one's surroundings (p. 1). With increased reliance on digital and online communication, the "hyperdigitalized" nature of COVID-19 may also induce "feelings of living in one's 'head' (mind)" and being "disconnected from one's body, self, and the world" (Ciaunica et al., 2022, p. 1). When evaluating the meaning of thwarted belongingness, it may be valuable to investigate the *dissociative effects* that individuals have been experiencing. For many people, COVID-19 meant that they "were facing a blank page and invited to draw a new life" (Grondin et al., 2020, p. 6).

To elaborate on this phenomenon, one may consider the hypothetical example of a baseball player desiring to play their respective sport during long-term quarantine measures. First, baseball is a sport that involves various actions, including hitting, throwing, and catching, that can be done while alone or socially isolated. Individuals can perform these actions themselves; however, it can be determined that the complexity is also limited as a consequence. Collective involvement or participation affords greater unpredictability and the possibility of adding multidimensional facets to the activity. Now, 'to play' baseball as 'a game' requires a collective expression of action—typically in the form of competitions, scrimmages, or practices. In most instances, individuals would not call themselves 'a baseball player' if they were not engaging in the collective expression of a game. Beyond this, however, it could also be argued that identification as a baseball player requires engagement in baseball as a *sport*, which infers competition against others under a particular set

of rules rather than just being a recreational activity. In order to play a sport, one needs to have access to shared spaces that will allow them to engage and interact in the collective expression of the activity. However, with COVID-19 restrictions, social isolation prohibits this process from occurring. This results in the individual not only losing their personal sense of identity as a baseball player (i.e., a baseball player as a noun) but also the act of playing baseball (i.e., baseball as a verb), which includes collective interactions with others through ‘sport.’

With COVID-19 restrictions, it is not just *that I can't play baseball*, but also that *I am not being a baseball player*. For a collegiate-level baseball player, this means the prevention of actions that comprise the role of a baseball player, which in terms of a personal sense of identity, may lead to questions like *What will I do if I am not playing baseball?* and *What will I miss this year by not getting to play baseball?*. Moreover, in terms of a collective sense of identity, this can lead to questions like *How is my team?* and *When will I get to play baseball with them again?*. Though the collective sense of identity is significant, the personal sense of identity is a fundamental orientation in how persons relate to and perceive themselves as being in the world. In the absence of role enactment (e.g., as ‘a baseball player’ or ‘athlete’), one’s identity and conception of self can be disrupted. In turn, the individual can experience a feeling of disorientation in that they find themselves unsure of what to do with themselves. Many of the tasks and activities that individuals engage in provide them with the scaffolding of their identity. In the absence of these tasks and activities, people lose sources of meaning and value. Furthermore, what makes this personal sense of identity particularly challenging to overcome is its unpredictability or unforeseeability. For example, many individuals end up wondering, not only *When will life get back to normal?* but also, *Will life get back to normal?*

Taking this a step further than what was proposed by Gratz et al. (2020), individuals cannot fully understand their identities or roles without some attention to the critical role that space plays. Given that persons have multiple roles and constituent parts that combine to form an overarching notion of self or identity (e.g., the concept of a work self, an academic self, a social self, etc.), it is vital to acknowledge the need for particular spaces and environments to actualize the actions and behaviours that comprise these various roles. A significant component of both identity and belongingness is accessibility to shared experiences and spaces. These spaces are the locations in which identities are crafted and reinforced (e.g., when a baseball pitcher throws to a batter on a baseball diamond). Though one may accomplish many

things online or virtually, space is still a necessity for a variety of roles, tasks, and functions. Without these spaces, which act as a terrain for identities to express or reveal themselves, people cannot fully actualize a sense of identity or role in a world governed by mass social-spatial restrictions.

In the aforementioned hypothetical notions of self, an employee may not feel like they are ‘employed’ in the absence of a common workplace, and a student may not feel like they are ‘in university’ in the absence of a classroom and campus. The interaction between space and identity is experientially grounded. If you were to ask a university student about virtual education versus in-person education, they would likely indicate that they feel entirely different from one another. Though you may still access information, read texts, interact with others, and receive a final grade, how you experienced the process of education is fundamentally different. If you were to ask a first-year student, *What is your university experience like?* they would probably say that it has not been a ‘university experience’ in that it has lacked many of the necessary and expected characteristics and properties associated with ‘being a student’ in university. They may not even feel like a university student because of the severe limitations of shared spaces and collective experiences. In the multiple absences of spaces and subsequent restrictions in experience, individuals during COVID-19 have not just been exposed to loneliness, social isolation, or thwarted belongingness—they have also lost access to many actions, behaviours, and roles that constitute their identity and sense of self. This loss has not just been to one facet or component of identity, but a simultaneous disturbance to multiple roles and ways of life. It can be argued that although one may use the terms loneliness, social isolation, and thwarted belongingness, such concepts require careful investigation to properly understand their uses and interactions. After conceptual analysis, it can be determined that these are more complex variables and interactions than what has been previously proposed.

### Limitations

This study does present some potential limitations. First, because there is little to no research employing conceptual analysis in COVID-19 research, this study relies heavily on analysis and interpretation—the *modus operandi* of philosophical research. Although this may be advantageous for conceptual clarifications and critical appraisals, researchers may view these methods as being too far removed from the disciplinary boundaries of psychology to serve its intended goals. Specifically, the priority of linguistic and phenomenological concerns could be considered redundant or irrelevant when compared to quantitative

methods. As a discipline, psychology has sought to demarcate itself from its philosophical roots since the nineteenth century (Wakefield, 2007). Today, psychology is identified as a ‘science’ adhering to empirical and statistical methods. Because this research uses social psychology, critical psychology, and philosophy, the receptive audience may be reduced to those either fluent or interested in all three areas. However, this article has prioritized clear, concise descriptions and reduced obscure jargon to mitigate this risk.

A second potential limitation of this study is the breadth of its aims and objectives. Given its holistic, interdisciplinary research approach, particular sections of this article may provide insufficient supportive reasoning. Researchers always run this risk when taking a ‘generalist’ approach, which may incur criticisms such as oversimplification and overextrapolation, especially from specialists within respective fields of study. Because of the lack of critical psychological and philosophical research examining concepts such as thwarted belongingness, loneliness, and social isolation, this study had to rely on complex theories and methods that may have been beyond their original purpose. The further challenge of this research is to investigate these concepts and do so *within* the milieu of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it should be noted that the aim of this study has been exploratory and critically reflective in nature, with the prospect of interdisciplinary researchers using it to better understand COVID-19 and its psychosocial implications.

### Recommendations for Future COVID-19 Research

Like many of the sciences, psychology has faced criticism over the past twenty years regarding the validity and replicability of its studies. According to Lilienfeld (2017), the maximization of publications and grant funding has become the *primum principium* of the discipline. This priority has been reinforced by the indoctrinated auspices of ‘publish or perish’ mentalities, which make higher rates of publication necessary in competitive academic environments. With more pressure and less time, social sciences often succumb to a “single-minded focus on programmatic research” and “diminished time for thinking deeply” (Lilienfeld, 2017, p. 660). Since January 2020, the emphasis on mass publication has only increased, with some researchers indicating diminished quality in research designs, methodologies, analytics, and interpretation (Bramstedt, 2020; Jung et al., 2021; Raynaud, 2021). For these reasons, many researchers in psychology and health-related disciplines have requested that more multidisciplinary and critically reflective research be conducted (Carel, 2021; Demkowicz et al., 2021; Glasziou et al., 2020).

One concern this article addresses is the meaning and representation of constructs during the COVID-19 pandemic and the prospective risks of conceptual overlap, vagueness, and incompleteness. It is recommended that more interdisciplinary contributions be provided on these subjects, especially as the method employed can be extended to a wide range of psychologically-oriented constructs and concepts. Philosophy, in particular, may serve in the process of critically analyzing metatheoretical, metascientific, and contingent factors associated with COVID-19 and its subsequent research studies. Scientists may question the ‘interpretive’ nature of philosophy on the grounds of insufficient objectivism and empiricism. However, it is valuable to recall the disciplinary area of *hermeneutics*, which has a longstanding commitment to the theoretical and methodological development of *interpretation*. Although it was first established and utilized by philosophy, hermeneutics has since spread throughout the humanities and social sciences. According to Taylor (1971), interpretation endeavours “to make clear, to make sense of an object of study . . . which in some way is confused, incomplete, cloudy, seemingly contradictory—in one way or another, unclear” (p. 3).

Applying philosophy may assist the sciences in reconsidering its research designs, objectives, and measures. More specifically, conceptual analysis can benefit psychological researchers by identifying errors, triangulating data, and recalibrating measures and designs. Of course, for this to occur, greater permeability of ideas and cosmopolitanism between disciplines is needed, which, given the complexity and pervasiveness of COVID-19, should be viewed as a historical crisis meriting collective responsibility and cooperation.

### Conclusion

This article has shown novel ways of investigating the underlying psychological and social effects of COVID-19, including thwarted belongingness, social isolation, and loneliness. After reviewing concerns regarding the quality of psychological and health research, the method of conceptual analysis was used to elucidate these concepts within the context of the pandemic. This analysis included the addition of identity and the significance of space to further clarify conceptual overlap, vagueness, and inconsistencies in meaning. Moreover, phenomenological considerations were provided to evaluate the connection between the aforementioned concepts, COVID-19 contingencies, and lived experience. Based on the outcome of the study, it has been proposed that conceptual analysis may be an undervalued method for exploring topics pertaining to COVID-19, as well as assessing pre-existing research literature. Philosophy, like many

other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, may have an important part to play in furthering our understanding of this unprecedented global event.

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