

Abstract

Background:

Loneliness, the unpleasant experience arising from a discrepancy between perceived and actual social relationships, is closely related to a range of psychopathologies, including psychosis. Psychosis is a constellation of heterogeneous symptoms, in which paranoia is one of the most distressing symptoms. Paranoia refers to beliefs concerning intentional threat by others. Loneliness and paranoia were found to be robustly associated in both clinical and non-clinical populations. However, the relationships between them and the underlying mechanisms are not clear.

The thesis:

The overall aim was to investigate the relationships between loneliness and paranoia and the underlying mechanisms. Specific questions were: 1) how loneliness and paranoia are related, in addition to emotional disturbances and negative core schemas? 2) does manipulation of loneliness lead to change in paranoia and is such change explained by change in attentional bias towards social threat? 3) Do loneliness and paranoia predict each other and how does the strength of these dynamics vary with interindividual difference in vulnerability to schizophrenia?

Methods:

Three studies were conducted using three separate non-clinical samples of young adults. Using a network analytic approach, Study 1 ($N = 2,089$) examined the structural relationship between loneliness, paranoia, emotional disturbances (i.e., depressive and anxiety symptoms) and negative core schemas about self and others in

a demographically diverse sample. Study 2 ($N = 158$) adopted an experimental design and examined changes in paranoia and attentional bias towards social threat following manipulation of loneliness. Study 3 ($N = 83$), using experience sampling method (ESM), examined the reciprocal relationship between momentary loneliness and paranoia, and the association between the strength of these dynamics with level of schizotypy.

Results:

Loneliness and paranoia were associated with each other both directly and indirectly via emotional disturbances and negative core schemas (Study 1). An induction of loneliness led to an increase in paranoia, and the effect was not explained by change in attentional bias towards social threat (Study 2). Momentary paranoia was associated with an increase in momentary loneliness. However, momentary loneliness was not associated with an increase in momentary paranoia. Interindividual difference in schizotypy was not associated with the strength of these reciprocal associations (Study 3).

Conclusions:

Loneliness and paranoia are closely and dynamically related to each other. Future research is required to further consolidate the psychological models of paranoia and loneliness by incorporating their reciprocal contributions to each other.

Keywords: perceived social isolation, persecutory delusions, suspiciousness, psychosis, schizophrenia, schizotypy