

# Pandemic And Existential Isolation: A Philosophical Interpretation

Andri Fransiskus Gultom <sup>1</sup>, Misnal Munir <sup>2</sup>, Ludovikus Bomans Wadu <sup>3</sup>, Meidi Saputra <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universitas PGRI Kanjuruhan Malang, Indonesia, [andri.franz@unikama.ac.id](mailto:andri.franz@unikama.ac.id)

<sup>2</sup> Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia, [misnalmunir@ugm.ac.id](mailto:misnalmunir@ugm.ac.id)

<sup>3</sup> Universitas PGRI Kanjuruhan Malang, Indonesia, [ludovikusbomanwadu@unikama.ac.id](mailto:ludovikusbomanwadu@unikama.ac.id)

<sup>4</sup> Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia, [meidi.saputra.fis@um.ac.id](mailto:meidi.saputra.fis@um.ac.id)

## Abstract

This research aimed at elaborating on the existential psychological situation of human beings during a pandemic. This study employed a qualitative philosophical approach through literature study and observational-field study. The results of this study reveal that existential isolation is present in individuals due to fear and anxiety of exposure to the COVID 19 pandemic. The existential isolation that occurred is precisely the effort of individuals to go beyond the existential isolation in the form of ethics of care for the others.

**Keywords:** existential isolation, the ethics of care, fear and trembling, I-sharing.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Rapid changes become one of the hallmarks in this century. The change drove human life to a situation called VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, & Zimmermann, 2020). Changes in the sense of negativity may imply fear, panic, and obscurity. But in a positive sense, people are challenged to rely on themselves, use their minds, establish cooperation with others, and promote the ethics of care. The ethics are based on life-loving efforts by emphasizing empathy for others who experience pain and suffering.

In the presence of a pandemic disaster, humans experience self-identity changes. There are existential isolation situations. Existential isolation can occur in addition to the pandemic situation (Nicol, Piccirillo, Mulsant, & Lenze, 2020), and it can also be caused due to policy of political ideology such as in South Korea (Park & Pinel, 2020). This paper focuses on examining human's existential isolation in a pandemic situation due to the Coronavirus (COVID 19).

The virus came from the city of Wuhan, China, and spread to almost 190 countries in the world, including Indonesia. The symptoms of the infection include cough, fever, shortness of breath, and severity may cause death. Data from the World Health Organization (WHO) covering 216 countries (data on June 11th, 2020) showed that 7,273,958 people confirmed to be positive infected by the virus and 413,372 died from the virus. WHO, thus, states that globally the COVID 19 pandemic is at a very high level of risk (World Health Organization, 2020).

WHO anticipates the situation by advocating each country for self-isolation and work from home. The form of self-isolation comes with some policies such as social distancing, physical distancing, and self-quarantine, and it may result in the risk of self-acceptance, fear of viruses, and behavioral changes (Harper, Satchell, Fido, & Latzman, 2020). Another policy, the large-scale social restrictions, requires citizens to withdraw from a social lifestyle into their home as private space. Consequently, individuals experience isolation. With such isolation, a change happens to the human being, from busy with outside

activities into busy with indoor activities. It is implied as existential isolation for humans.

## II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To study pandemic and existential isolation from a philosophical interpretation
2. To interpretate existential psychological of human beings during a pandemic.
3. Find out the effort of individuals to go beyond the existential isolation in the ethics of care for the others.

## III. METHOD OF RESEARCH

This research employed a qualitative philosophical approach that is elaborated using *verstehen* method that understands the literature about existential isolation by referring to the social-philosophical view, description (to giving an outline of the individual experiencing existential isolation), comparison (to comparing between the thought of death existentialism, freedom, isolation, and absence of meaning. The last method used is hermeneutics, which interprets the problem of existential isolation by understanding the situation of the times and giving way out (Lyng, 2012; Bakker, 1984). These methods are the explicit and implicit "core axle" of this study.

## IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

Existential isolation refers to an unbridgeable gulf between oneself and other beings (Yalom, 1980: 355). Yalom understands the existential isolation by referring to Martin Heidegger. It is about humans who are "thrown into the world" and causes them to be in "separation from the world." The separation between the individual and the world signifies what Heidegger called "unconcealment," that there is a process for the most profound inquiry, leading himself to recognize that we are finite, and "Sein-zum-Tode" (directed at death). The situation is thrown, and with the world as well as with the other, it is inexorably alone (Heidegger, 1996). Yalom explained that existential isolation is because human experience is more subjective in living reality. That is, humans cannot personally experience the world with the sensory experience of others. In that context, humans have a variety of personal experiences in reality, and sometimes there is a gap between himself and outside of him. The gap makes humans inherently experiencing existential isolation (Yalom, 1980).

The existential isolation is an academic term in the ramification of philosophy. Those are phenomenology, humanistic psychology, and existentialism. All three fields are in the realm of philosophy. Existential isolation in phenomenology that focuses on individual direct experiences and personal understanding of reality as the main subject is worth noting. Existential isolation in humanistic psychology traces the psychiatric trail of individuals with others who can determine their identity. The problem of isolation in existentialism focuses more on the "the ultimate concern," namely: death, freedom, isolation, and loss of life meaning. The four things have been reflected by existential philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, and Jean-Paul Sartre (Berry-Smith & Stephen, 2012; Yalom, 1980). The problem of human existence is to deal with the anxiety that also always presupposes attention and involvement.

The existential isolation becomes a crucial problem of implications for changing the way human beings reside, both for themselves as a person or a social relationship in citizenship. In a pandemic situation, humans become separated from each other. It implies humans to be more in the selfish dimension rather than altruistic (Dawkins, 1981). Ego to save oneself, the group itself rather than togetherness in the form of citizens. The most worrying thing about existential isolation is anxiety.

Anxiety becomes a significant theme in philosophical discourse, especially existentialism. The existentialism in philosophy discourse is often made accessible by essentialism. One moves to find his core self that is most likely exists at the end of life. In contrast, essentialism finds its essence in the beginning. Which one is the first, essence or existence? This problem is still debated further, perhaps in another opportunity. The focus of this writing is existence. Existence precedes essence.

Søren Kierkegaard is a philosopher who began the existentialism. He reflects existentialism as a concrete form of the human self in a series of everyday experiences with motion through life stages: aesthetic, ethics, and religion (Broudy & Thomte, 1949). He considers anxiety as an inevitable event in life. He wrote a book called *Fear and Trembling* to explain an anxious

situation, a person who is often overshadowed by fear to move forward (Kierkegaard, 2010).

Kierkegaard's thoughts and the study from Pinel could be an attempt to study the dimensions of ethics of care. With the idea of ethics of care, researchers can bridge the gap for anxiety due to existential isolation. Other scientific studies are also expected to cope with the COVID 19 pandemic as the cause of anxiety. There is a maximum chance for researchers to experiment, observe, and find healers for the COVID 19 pandemic sufferers. The task of philosophy in this paper, other than as trajectory of human experience, the use of human condition, is to find self-therapy through ethics of care as a form of human involvement.

Some researches examine the isolation of existence, but each realm has its characteristics. One of them is research of Park and Pinel, which elaborates existential isolation as a manifestation of subjective feelings from a sense of being alone in one experience and differentiated from the feeling of loneliness due to lack of interpersonal relationships. Park and Pinel examined the isolation scale of existence in South Korea, to test its existential isolation and its correlation as a cultural orientation function as well as to investigate gender differences in existential isolation. Their research was conducted in the context of South Korea and psychological.

The existential scales they examined include: extraversion (social interaction), approval, awareness, emotional stability, openness to experience, loneliness, emotional loneliness, family social support and themes, life satisfaction, decreased happiness. They found that social practices play an important role in determining the level of existential isolation and that managing dependence with others can describe one important key to reducing the existential isolation (Park & Pinel, 2020). The existential isolation identifies a cage from the human mind. Their study shows that existential isolation generates a stable situation for two weeks and change as expected between age as constructed. They also summarize the written results by determining the uniqueness of the construct and relevance to understand the cause and consequence of existential isolation

## V. DISCUSSION

Helen Keller and existential isolation in this discussion will be a case study. Hellen Keller experienced self-isolation due to a deficiency in

him. She feels alienated by the surrounding environment.

The existential isolation that is commonly known is the experience of a woman named Helen Keller. She suffered from existential isolation due to her disability in hearing and vision. She felt confined to a situation where others were not with her, did not care, and did not even assume she existed. Here, she was isolated, and there was a psychological problem in her environment. Her emotions were unstable, irritable, and could destroy her. The self-existence of Hellen Keller was in isolation (Nielsen, 2009).

Helen's self-change moment occurred when she met her teacher Anne Mansfield Sullivan on March 3, 1887. Initially, the bending took place, but thanks to Anne's patience, Hellen began to feel another person who came and able to touch her. The first lesson from Anne was teaching Hellen a finger gesture, then it was followed by the word "doll." The reason for the word "doll" is more because of her closeness with the thing since the doll was often on Hellen's arms. Besides, Hellen also understands the doll as a gift. Later, the difficulty was experienced by Anne as Hellen opposed and rejected Anne's orders. Hellen then gained the idea of finding a place that could make Hellen comfortable and could concentrate but remained in Anne's direction and supervision. They moved to a cottage on the estate. After passing through dramatic difficulties, Anne managed to teach the next word, "water" (Nielsen, 2009).

There are processes in existential isolation; the first thing that can be done is the process of approaching or touching an isolated person. This process begins with a greeting, approaching, and touching the person in question carefully then to objects owned. When the first touches are recognized, self-introduction arises. Existential isolation in the context of Hellen Keller seems to be continued with the process of evacuation. Evacuation provides a comfortable place and facilitates further communication from way out of isolation.

In the study of existentialism, isolation occurred because individuals are stuck with the pleasure and satisfaction of him. Individuals who experience isolation are individuals who are at an aesthetic level. This stage is a more prioritizing desire always to fulfill the lack of

human beings. Kierkegaard modeled a Don Juan, someone with a passionate desire, who always suffice shortcomings by seeking a pseudo-pleasure, then at some point suffered saturation and was isolated. At that isolation point, for Kierkegaard, Don Juan would experience solitude, inner suffering. In short, there is unsatisfied satisfaction (Dunning, 2015).

Kierkegaard then provides insight into individuals who are in existential isolation by trying to identify themselves, look for the factors that cause loneliness, and at that time, there needs to be a self-transition to be a better person. Here, the aesthetic process switches to the ethical stage. Of actions that choose pleasure alone, there is an attitude of consideration in each option for action. Ethical stages make individuals have a responsibility, a form of concern other than self and also in others. In essence, individuals get out of isolation situations by getting to know them first.

I-sharing and Interpersonal Relationships are important points in overcoming the problem of existential isolation. The most important stage to provide therapy to people experiencing post-evacuation existential isolation is to teach sharing. This stage can be known as the "I-sharing" form. Pinel has proposed six I-sharing concepts, namely; (1) I-sharing in general for Pinel is a specific form of divided reality; (2) I-sharing refers to a variety of moments when people believe that they have similarities in the moment of experience as another person; (3) I-sharing is a part of a shared reality agency; Not all reality agents share the form of an I-sharing agent; (4) I-sharing has particular potential and results among groups; (4) existential isolation of human recorded the potential of I-sharing; (5) the work on I-sharing and existential insulation can have important clinical implications.

The first explanation in Pinel's thinking, that the existence of my concept of sharing, says that part of the human reality that is split in sometimes black and white situations, like grief, and so on. From there, we need to observe more detail of each split situation by looking for the similarities of our human condition. The ability to want to share for Pinel needs to be detailed by selecting which sections can be used to see the potential to help people out of existential isolation. We can link the role of an attempt to get out of self-cover be willing to share.

In the Helen Keller case, post-evacuation, we can contribute to exposure since isolation can enable a person to be himself. This is because, by sharing, our ego is aware of the alter ego so it appears as friendship. In a rather loose explanation, the personal self can be formed from a meeting with another self, or auto-affection. Another presence gives a touch of a sense of self-disclosure.

I-sharing has the same moment as everyone else. I-sharing focuses its significance on the results of interpersonal relationships or relationships between groups. I-sharing helps to respect different people as in objective and sometimes important ways, and against strong tendencies to support members in the group and lack respect for people who are outside of the group. The results of research and theory show that the existential isolation of feeling alone in a person's experience explains the potential of I-sharing, as far as people with high levels of existential isolation who interested in those who have reason to believe I-sharing. Recent findings are reviewed, followed by clinical discussions of occupational implications.

Human beings have a stimulus with the ability to feel and perceive the cognitive distinction. Humans' abilities, such as those that are in humans (internal aspect), will be much more useful when they able to share through communication with others (interpersonal). The possible situation where human beings cannot share these various abilities can make them feel existentially isolated. The human ability to think would be useful if there is any individual or group outside of themselves, to know the extent of myself better. Similarly, the ability to conception and differentiation can make people feel isolated from them. He felt there was something that could not be shared but understandable. The situation proves that the experience is worthy of a person.

I-sharing offers solutions for existential isolation (Cacioppo, Hawkley, & Thisted, 2010). When two or more people share, they feel existentially connected, if only a moment. Thus, while existential isolation threatens core needs for validation of beliefs and ownership, I-sharing meets this need (Huneke & Pinel, 2016). The important thing that needs to be underlined is not only the potential of I-sharing but also the role of existential isolation in its effects.

In situations and isolated experiences due to pandemic, we may experience some sort of suspicion on the closeness and touch that comes from others. We experience fear, in a broad sense, as if the movement turned to the situation that Helen Keller is experiencing. We seek to close ourselves by making distance and silent inside the house. Communication is also located between each other but mediated by a third party (social media). From the pandemic situation, we learn that we are in certain situations, afraid of foreign touches, which we know or do not know (Canetti, 1984). At that point, people are trying to save themselves.

## VI. SUMMARY / SUGGESTIONS

Based on results and discussions, the study focuses on human beings experiencing existential isolation in a pandemic. Existentialism is a school of philosophy that seeks to explain that individuals experiencing existential isolation will experience anxiety. The pandemic causes individuals to experience anxiety, but the situation can precisely lead the individual to know himself, understand that there is potential in themselves that needs to be realized. The process of identifying and understanding yourself, in existentialism, also needs to involve yourself in the lives of others. Communication with social media and the ability to share can be self-caring for the sufferings of others. At the time of the pandemic, individuals need to get out of themselves and still forge togetherness with others, but while maintaining medical procedures.

## VII. A SUGGESTION

Therefore, the recommendation of the research team is to focus on the individual to know himself through others. Attempts to get to know others can be trained using the concept of caring ethics. By prioritizing care for others while remaining a health protocol, the anxiety experienced during the isolation period can be resolved. Efforts to build cooperation in a network of volunteer-based organizations can be a form of concern. I-sharing becomes more trained by promoting a sense of humanity

## REFERENCES

1. Bakker, A. (1984). **The Methods of Philosophy**. Jakarta: Ghalia Indonesia.
2. Berry-Smith, & Stephen, F. (2012). **Death, Freedom, Isolation and Meaninglessness and the Existential Psychotherapy of Irvin D. Yalom**. Auckland: Diss. Auckland University of Technology.
3. Broudy, H. S., & Thomte, R. (1949). **Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion. Philosophy and Phenomenological Research**. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2104093>
4. Cacioppo, J. T., Hawkley, L. C., & Thisted, R. A. (2010). **Perceived social isolation makes me sad: 5-year cross-lagged analyses of loneliness and depressive symptomatology in the Chicago health, aging, and social relations study**. *Psychology and Aging*, 25(2), 453–463. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017216>
5. Caligiuri, P., De Cieri, H., Minbaeva, D., Verbeke, A., & Zimmermann, A. (2020). **International HRM insights for navigating the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications for future research and practice**. *Journal of International Business Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41267-020-00335-9>
6. Canetti, E. (1984). **Crowds and Power**. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (Macmillan).
7. Dawkins, R. (1981). **In Defence of Selfish Genes**. *Philosophy*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819100050580>
8. Dunning, S. N. (2015). **Introduction. In Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Inwardness**. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400857708.1>
9. Gultom, A. F., Munir, M., & Ariani, I. (2019). **Perubahan Identitas Diri Dalam Eksistensialisme Kierkegaard: Relevansinya Bagi Mental Warga**. *Jurnal Pendidikan Kewarganegaraan*,

- 9(November), 77–84.  
<https://doi.org/10.20527/kewarganegaraan.v9i2.8052>
10. Harper, C. A., Satchell, L. P., Fido, D., & Latzman, R. D. (2020). **Functional Fear Predicts Public Health Compliance in the COVID-19 Pandemic.** *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-020-00281-5>
  11. Heidegger, M. J. S. (1996). **Being and Time: a Translation of Sein und Zeit.** New York: SUNY Press.
  12. Huneke, M., & Pinel, E. C. (2016). **Fostering selflessness through I-sharing.** *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 63, 10–18.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2015.11.003>
  13. Kierkegaard, S. (2010). **Fear and Trembling** (H. V. H. and E. H. Hong, Ed.). Retrieved from  
[http://books.google.com/books?id=mE7\\_s9iRSB4C&pgis=1](http://books.google.com/books?id=mE7_s9iRSB4C&pgis=1)
  14. Lyng, S. (2012). **Existential Transcendence in Late Modernity: Edgework and Hermeneutic Reflexivity.** *Human Studies*, 35(3), 401–414.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-012-9242-0>
  15. Nicol, G. E., Piccirillo, J. F., Mulsant, B. H., & Lenze, E. J. (2020). **Action at a Distance: Geriatric Research during a Pandemic.** *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jgs.16443>
  16. Nielsen, K. (2009). **The radical lives of Helen Keller. In The Radical Lives of Helen Keller.**  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/sls.2005.0005>
  17. Park, Y. C., & Pinel, E. C. (2020). **Existential isolation and cultural orientation. Personality and Individual Differences.**  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.109891>
  18. Pinel, Elizabeth C. Anson E. Long, Mark J. Landau, T. P. (2004). **I-Sharing, the Problem of Existential Isolation, and Their Implication for Interpersonal and Intergroup Phenomena.** In T. P. Jeef Greenberg, Sander L. Koole (Ed.), *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology* (pp. 358–374). New Jersey, London: The Guilford Press.
  19. World Health Organization. (2020). **WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard.** Retrieved June 11, 2020, from World Health Organization website:  
<https://covid19.who.int/>
  20. Yalom, I. D. (1980). **Existential Psychotherapy.** New York: Basic Books Inc.