

REVIEW ARTICLE

Social exclusion, social isolation, and mental health: Understanding the Ukrainian context

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The paper aims to reveal the essence of social exclusion and social isolation, their impact on mental health, and consider the experiences of Ukrainians who may potentially fall under the definition of socially excluded groups.

Materials and Methods: The study is based on a transdisciplinary approach combining socio-psychological and philosophical analysis along with narrative interviews. The authors used interpretive research paradigm, integrative anthropological approach, system-analytical, discursive, hermeneutical, and comparative approaches. For narrative interviews, methods are reported in line with COREQ. The data collection was carried out using PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar databases. Research papers were identified according to search terms: "social exclusion", "socially excluded groups", "social isolation", "mental health", "well-being", "discrimination", "poverty", "belonging", "depression", "anxiety", "anger", "hopelessness", "alienation", "loneliness", "communication". To understand problems faced by those who may belong to socially excluded groups, their symbolic systems of orientations, and their coping strategies for overcoming difficulties, the narrative interview was conducted. As recent studies show, nowadays, in the context of the war with its devastating consequences, analysis of narrative interviews acquires special significance, primarily from the standpoint of analyzing the mechanisms of individual adaptation to the tragedies of the war. The authors conducted five interviews with people who potentially fall under the definition of representatives of socially excluded groups. All participants were assigned pseudonyms, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. Interviews took place online or in-person and lasted around two hours. The participants were interviewed between January and March 2026.

Conclusions: Being one of determinants of mental health, social exclusion has become increasingly widespread in Ukraine, and the ongoing war has given rise to new groups that are currently most susceptible to social exclusion. During narrative interviews aimed at uncovering the experiences of Ukrainians who may fall into these groups, it was found that participants do not consider themselves socially excluded, although everyone talks about voluntary or involuntary social isolation that negatively affects or may affect their mental health and well-being. The narratives illustrate not only experiences of social isolation, but also the ways in which participants propose to address the unmet needs of individuals suffering from social isolation.

KEY WORDS: social exclusion, socially excluded groups, social isolation, mental health, well-being, discrimination, poverty, belonging, depression, anxiety, anger, hopelessness, alienation, loneliness, communication

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INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest minds of humanity, Aristotle, argued that "man is naturally a political animal, and that whosoever is naturally and not accidentally unfit for society, must be either inferior or superior to man". Indeed, from the dawn of human society, human beings have formed communities to survive as a group; and every newborn member of this group has required care and attention in order to survive as an individual. We are born with all possible genetic predispositions and potential, however, what exactly will be activated and developed depends on the impact of social environment. A human being is a complex biopsychosocial-spiritual phenomenon deeply rooted in each of

these realms, which are critically important for him/her. The social component of human existence has played a vital role in shaping our identities, values, behaviors, and our destinies. We become "true" humans through interactions with other people. The need for social connections is so deeply ingrained in our nature that the fate of feral people seems terrible and even unrealistic to us. Striving for social connections, friendship, acceptance, affiliation, we are subconsciously afraid of being excluded from society. Therefore, it is no wonder that ostracism in ancient Athens was one of the terrible punishments. To this day, ignoring and exclusion – components of ostracism – make us suffer sometimes even more than overt physical violence. Recent studies have

convincingly demonstrated that “people have a need to belong and that threats to belonging have very real and very devastating consequences on the individual, both psychologically and physically” [1]. And although some people strive to disappear from the social scene preferring solitude, they still do not lose the feeling of belonging, which is “a fundamental requirement for security, reproductive success, and mental health” [2]. As Baumeister and Leary put it, the need to belong is a basic human motivation [3]. Accordingly, denial of acceptance and respect, rejection, and exclusion negatively impact the emotional and cognitive spheres, and overall well-being of those excluded.

Nowadays, much research has been devoted to the problem of social exclusion and the ways to overcome it. Impacting equality, social cohesion, and well-being, “social exclusion refers to the process by which individuals or groups are systematically marginalized and denied access to essential resources, opportunities, and social networks” [4]. With its far-reaching negative consequences, social exclusion dramatically affects human lives that undermines the entire global social organism. A happy future society with all civil liberties will remain an abstract concept unless it can be supported by people’s chances to realize their potential and their own life projects. Both state institutions and a civil society share responsibility for progress towards human equality and inclusion that is the matter of our human existence.

The challenges of social exclusion do not bypass Ukraine. Despite ongoing research, characteristics and dynamics of social exclusion in the Ukrainian society leave room for exploration. Initially, the challenges of social exclusion were examined through the lens of economic status, low level of income and consumption, predominantly passive type of interaction with society, deep social polarization after the collapse of the USSR, downward social mobility, unemployment, the absence or rupture of vital social ties, the lack of necessary education that ultimately leads to poverty and, consequently, the lack of representation in society [5].

In fact, the concept of social exclusion is often used as a synonym for poverty and inequality. Sometimes the concepts of poverty and social exclusion go hand in hand acting as factors that hinder social integration. However, the concept of social exclusion encompasses a broader dimension of the social world and is associated with a specific understanding that varies depending on cultural norms, values, politics, national contexts, etc. Social exclusion is not only the result of the interaction of disadvantageous factors, but also a process by which individuals or groups become or remain systematically disadvantaged [6].

In the 2009 executive summary report “Social Protection and Social Inclusion in Ukraine”, it was noted that despite progress towards reducing the absolute poverty, “the Ukrainian society does not address problems of some minorities, which face social exclusion. It concerns traditionally vulnerable population groups (disabled, ethnic minorities such as Roma, Crimean Tatar, etc.) as well as new groups that appeared rather recently – HIV/AIDS-infected, drug consumers (in particular injection users), and sex minorities. Generally, tolerant attitude to such people is combined with intolerance of staying in their neighborhood, leading to social isolation of these groups in all spheres of life... The main task of new strategy is determination of groups of social exclusion and development of measures on their integration in the society” [7].

Later, scholars were focused on the exacerbation of social tension, widening income gaps, increasing restrictions on access to resources and services for a significant portion of the population, the loss of part of Ukrainian territory (before large-scale military action), internally displaced persons, marginalization of certain groups, systemic corruption, hyperinflation, low wages, unemployment, the problems of remote communities, a decrease in the level of citizens motivation, deviant and delinquent behavior in society, etc. The researchers also emphasized such issues as poor health and physical limitations; gender, age, ethnic, religious, cultural and educational discrimination; restrictions on freedom of speech; limitations in satisfying cultural needs; decreased motivation for work; low participation in the political life; increased social instability, etc. [8]. One of the most important factors of social exclusion in Ukraine is unemployment, which entails informal employment, the expansion of the shadow economy, brain drain, and labor migration abroad.

Following the outbreak of a large-scale war unleashed by Russia in 2022, the situation became even more acute, adversely affecting Ukrainian citizens. Many of them have faced combined effects of the threatening physical consequences of the war, such as death, injury, disability, sexual violence, and emotional consequences, such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as indirect stressors, such as death or injury of the loved ones, economic hardships, or geographic displacement. Many Ukrainians joined the armed forces to fight against the enemy. Caught up in the tornado of the war, some Ukrainian citizens were forced to leave their homes being involved into the ongoing struggle for the future without any clear resolution. By 2026, over 4.6 million internally displaced persons (IDP) have been officially registered [9]. According to the Center for Economic Strategy, as of January 2026, 5.6 million Ukrainian refu-

gees remain abroad [10]. On the other hand, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Andrii Sybiha, states that, according to the Ukrainian authorities, about 8 million citizens are forced to stay in the foreign countries [11]. As the result of the war, the number of people with disabilities is constantly growing in Ukraine. As of early 2026, over 3 million people in Ukraine have disabilities. In addition, the war increased sensitivity to Russian language and sometimes gave rise to a negative attitude towards its speakers. The qualitative research conducted by the analysts from the OPORA Civil Network in 2025 emphasizes that the representatives of the above-mentioned groups, namely, the Ukrainian people staying abroad, internally displaced persons, veterans and their families, people with disabilities, and the Russian-speaking Ukrainians, are the most susceptible to social exclusion at the present time [12]. The emergence of the new excluded groups in Ukrainian society creates an additional burden on the entire system of social functioning, including the healthcare system, since social exclusion is a trigger that initiates negative processes in health and well-being. According to WHO Europe, "being excluded from the life of society and treated as less than equal leads to worse health and greater risks of premature death" [13]. The process of social exclusion increases "the risks of divorce and separation, disability, illness, addiction and social isolation and vice versa, forming vicious circles that deepen the predicament people face" [13]. Actually, all of the above groups may fall into the realm of social exclusion. However, the question arises: do members of these groups truly experience the full depth of discrimination and social exclusion, and if so, how does it manifest itself?

AIM

The paper aims to reveal the essence of social exclusion and social isolation, their impact on mental health, and consider the experiences of Ukrainians who may potentially fall under the definition of socially excluded groups.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is based on a transdisciplinary approach combining socio-psychological and philosophical analysis along with narrative interviews. The authors used interpretive research paradigm, integrative anthropological approach, system-analytical, discursive, hermeneutical, and comparative approaches. For narrative interviews, methods are reported in line with COREQ [14].

The data collection was carried out using PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar databases. Research papers were identified according to search

terms: "social exclusion", "socially excluded groups", "social isolation", "mental health", "well-being", "discrimination", "poverty", "belonging", "depression", "anxiety", "anger", "hopelessness", "alienation", "loneliness", "communication".

To understand the problems faced by those who may belong to socially excluded groups, their symbolic systems of orientations, and their coping strategies for overcoming difficulties, the narrative interview was conducted. As recent studies show, nowadays, in the context of the war with its devastating consequences, analysis of narrative interviews acquires special significance, primarily from the standpoint of analyzing the mechanisms of individual adaptation to the tragedies of the war [15].

The authors conducted five interviews with people who potentially fall under the definition of representatives of socially excluded groups. All participants were assigned pseudonyms, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. Interviews took place online or in-person and lasted around two hours. The participants were interviewed between January and March 2026.

To reflect the participants' experiences and to understand whether respondents see themselves as socially excluded, three subthemes were developed: feelings of social exclusion before the war, during the war, and ways to overcome it (if any). The data were interpreted by the researchers in the context of the entire story.

ETHICS

The narrative study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv within the framework of the project #26BΦ041-01.

AI STATEMENT

The authors state that no AI tools were used in writing this article.

REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

SOCIAL HARMONY, MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING ARE INEXTRICABLY LINKED. SINCE THE ADOPTION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN 2015, THE PREVENTION AND TREATMENT OF NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES, INCLUDING BEHAVIORAL AND NEUROLOGICAL DISORDERS, HAVE BECOME A PRIORITY. Mental health is linked to almost all sustainable development goals, which are universal and cover all countries in the world. Although we cannot currently eliminate the biological causes of mental disorders, it is within our power to positively influence the social

determinants of mental health, which represent a modified set of intervention targets available to prevent the onset of mental health disorders and to promote positive mental health. Social determinants of mental health encompass a set of structural conditions that influence individuals' mental health outcomes and contribute to mental health inequalities across the lifespan [16]. Social determinants of mental health "are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels, which are themselves influenced by policy choices" [17]. As Kirkbride et al. emphasize, they are not distributed randomly, but are determined by systems and institutions of power, which often generate and reproduce intergenerational inequalities in people's opportunities to realize safe, prosperous, and healthy lives [16]. Since the risks of developing any mental disorder are inextricably linked to people's living conditions, improving population mental health by developing effective strategies for preventing social risk factors becomes a central issue of social justice [18].

One of the most important social determinants of mental health is social exclusion. According to the latest estimates, between 2.33 and 2.43 billion people (roughly 32 per cent of the global population) are at high risk of social exclusion [19]. The situation becomes even more alarming when exclusion affects multiple identities, which often intersect and reinforce exclusion, and those who bear them are subject to increased negative attitudes and discrimination. This undermines the foundations of any society, negatively impacting both physical and mental health. An fMRI study of social exclusion shows that some of the same neural mechanisms that are involved in experiencing physical pain may also be involved in experiencing social pain associated with social exclusion and rejection, therefore, social pain is similar to physical pain in its neurocognitive function [20]. Painful feelings undermine the very foundation of well-being, which is the multidimensional construct [21]. They determine the quality of life of both an individual and society [22, 23]. Social exclusion can trigger a decline in emotional, psychological and social well-being and can lead to susceptibility to maladjustment and psychopathology [24].

Excluded groups tend to perceive prejudice against themselves in a wider range of contexts than members of privileged groups often reporting physical and mental health problems. They have higher rates of morbidity and mortality, high disability rates, shorter life expectancy, high level of infant mortality; demonstrate anxiety, depression, psychological distress, lower life satisfaction, post-traumatic stress disorder, hopelessness, feelings of worthlessness, resentment, fear and

may be prone to excessive alcohol consumption or drug addiction [25 – 27].

Experience of prejudice and discrimination can reduce the sense of control over own lives trapping people in meaninglessness, which is one of the most dangerous "non-protocol" situations, in which the very existence of an individual becomes worthless, with all the ensuing negative outcomes. External threats, such as the war in Ukraine, further aggravate the situation. Being adversely affected by the war, all Ukrainians can develop the typical psychological profile of trauma, mistrust, suspicion, and a sense of hopelessness that can be even more pronounced among the members of excluded groups.

Despite a number of international and national programs aimed at maintaining and improving mental health of Ukrainians, the real situation leaves much to be desired. 83% of respondents experience high levels of stress, with 78% directly linking this to a full-scale Russian invasion. Financial difficulties worry 52% of the population, and the socio-political situation is a deep concern for 47%. 39% of respondents worry about the loss of a source of income. 58% of respondents experience anxiety and tension; 50% – poor sleep; 49% – exhaustion and bad mood; 45% – emotional instability; 44% – irritation and anger [28].

Ukrainian researchers stress that the most crucial factor that affects mental health of Ukrainians is the war with Russia; and social determinants closely related to the war are the political situation, the effectiveness of public administration, the level of democracy, social conflicts, social protection, inflationary processes, corruption, migration processes, crime, the health care system [29]. All these determinants are inextricably linked to social exclusion, which, as the overall situation worsens, can affect more and more people. Even after the war ends, the spread of mental disorders resulting from it will pose a serious problem for the Ukrainian society.

The deterioration of the environmental situation in Ukraine during the war has also negatively affected mental health and well-being of Ukrainians causing anxiety, panic, depression, insomnia, fear, and uncertainty [30]. Members of marginalized and excluded groups are particularly vulnerable to such adverse outcomes and often suffer disproportionately from mental health impacts of climate change, which can worsen existing mental health inequalities, particularly where health services are scarce or inadequate [31].

To reduce the burden of mental disorders in Ukraine, it is necessary to increase social and institutional support, which requires identifying potential interventions aimed at the social determinants of mental health,

including social exclusion with special tailoring for the representatives of excluded, underprivileged groups. The Ukrainian society must realize that social exclusion is the result of structural inequality in institutional systems, which is critically important for changing society's attitude towards financing social programs aimed at excluded groups [32]. This will facilitate prioritization of targeted psychological interventions by both decision-makers and representatives of excluded groups, as within the transdisciplinary paradigm, the voices of all stakeholders matter.

Given the unprecedented burden of mental health issues in Ukraine as a result of the large-scale invasion of Russian troops, it would be advisable to identify excluded groups for interventions, as well as to understand whether all potential members of these excluded groups are such in the classical sense, whether they feel excluded from life, and if so, what ways out of the situation they see for themselves.

To gain a deeper understanding of these issues, we conducted five narrative interviews with people who may potentially fall under the definition of socially excluded groups.

The participant *Ihor* is a 50-year-old injured military veteran who believes that social inclusion is activism and demand for justice. Based on his detailed story, *Ihor* was not very sociable even before the war, he felt a barrier between himself and other people.

"Groups in which there was a clear leader or several leaders were not for me. Everything, everything depends on them. And others, like me, introverts, for whom a common cauldron in hell is prepared, do not feel very comfortable there"

Nowadays, in Kyiv, he feels the same detachment, partly explaining this by the fact that Kyiv is a large city. Besides, seeing strong healthy men who live peaceful lives during the war, he does not understand them. Though *Ihor* does not demonstrate overt aggression, but condemnation, misunderstanding, and avoidance of contact with them are clearly expressed in his statements. All this distances him from the flow of social life in Kyiv.

"You feel like a stranger among these fit guys in the gym. The feeling that they are somehow not your type... Before, I used to be irritated. Now I feel more like an alienation. Well, they are not from my circle at all. Even if they are good guys... but when there is the war in Ukraine, they are strong, and they are in the gym, it is a little different. For people who voluntarily went to fight in the first days, it is a completely different pole"

Ihor has always worked in graphic design sphere, even during his military service. Today, his job is related to this field. But he does not feel like a fully-fledged

civilian, although he has no plans to return to the army like his friends.

"I am no longer a soldier; I have been discharged... And I do not really consider myself a civilian"

Striving for social communication and leading a rather active lifestyle (meetings, exhibitions, concerts, improvisations, master classes, sports), *Ihor* would like to be part of a community, for example, a veterans' one. However, when meeting other veterans, he remains detached from communication.

"I am often told that I lead a very active social life. But in reality, I feel that I have little contact with people. I am not involved in the activities of the veteran community. I can tell you that I am a passive consumer of the services provided by veteran organizations. I just use everything. But if it were not for this veteran activity – veteran sports, I would hardly go to the gym"

As *Ihor* put it, he needs communication at "a grass-roots level" meaning family and close friends whom he lacks. His main circle of communication is at work, more often online, and social networks. As he explains:

"Sometimes I want to communicate with colleagues... It is interesting. Working moments. It is also important. It has meaning. And also, online communication, which is necessary... they are social media friends. Friends-acquaintances with whom, for example, you correspond several times a day. This is also important. But that is all... Family, friends, close circle are my failure"

Ihor attributes his lack of communication not to the fact that he is a veteran, but to his personal traits:

"This is probably not a veteran problem, but rather my personal one. Because, apparently, there is a barrier between me and another person in any way. And I need to cross it somehow. There are such barrier-free people, but not me"

In the case of *Ihor*, we cannot talk about social exclusion, since many organizations actually take care of him; he is not forcibly excluded from social life. While *Ihor* does not experience rejection as *Other* in real life, he nevertheless sees it on social media and believes that state bodies should address this issue at the institutional level. In his opinion, the veteran community should have certain privileges and recognition. Revealing his need for recognition, he says:

"Veterans should have a higher status, like a higher caste. And being next to them should also be a privilege. Unfortunately, it is probably not possible for everyone... Well, even one person said that she was proud to be next to me. I like it. I remember it. This is an important point"

As *Ihor* put it, the current situation can be improved by creation of permanent cultural centers that will provide a platform for joint events, entertainment, dating, etc. These centers should be intended for both veterans/

military and civilians, have convenient locations, and work schedules.

"I wonder why organizations involve male and female veterans only... however, people from the street, for example, women-teachers or someone else, are not involved. That is, those people who are ready to communicate, people of the opposite sex... Personally, I would be more interested in it"

The participant Andrii (in his 50s) is gay who serves in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Before serving in the army, he had to go through the difficult path of an IDP, which led him to a state of depression and loneliness.

"I felt deep depression and loneliness during the war, because I was an IDP, I was forced to live with my parents, to take care of them, although before that they were independent, and because of the war their physical and emotional states deteriorated... and I was forced to move, to live somewhere not at home, but in tents, shelters"

Andrii felt he was thrown out of the flow of life. Having lost relationships and social connections, he actively looked for work in a new place. In the army this critical situation changed: the number of contacts increased, and the IDP's narrative of chaos was replaced by strict army discipline where everything is clearly laid out. He gradually developed an awareness that he could have a good time alone. While before this situation used to stress Andrii out, he now enjoys his time alone, though he is also happy to have company.

"Mostly, when I have a day off, I am alone. And if before it drove me into depression and sadness, now I get high from it. Well, I have no excessive expectations. When it happens that I cross paths with friends, acquaintances, or strangers, it makes me happy too"

Describing social exclusion as a process or state in which people cannot exercise their right to life, cannot satisfy their basic needs and pursue their own goals, Andrii, nevertheless, reduces the topic of social exclusion to his own experience stating that as a child he was an introvert and did not feel included in society or any group.

"Being an introvert, I was so shy and quiet. It was very difficult for me to start communicating with other people"

Although he tried to develop his communication skills, he failed to overcome his lack of self-confidence, which ultimately deepened his depression leading to alcohol abuse. However, as Andrii noted, this was caused not by external conditions, but by internal factors.

"I felt bad. I wanted to kill myself literally. It was such a difficult state: depression, despair, loneliness. But it was all on my individual level, regardless of any group or community"

As a gay person, Andrii did not feel any discrimination in his pre-war social circle, however, being in the army,

he conceals this information, so it is difficult to say how Andrii's life in the army would have developed under different circumstances and whether he would have felt excluded.

"My situation is somewhat unique. On the one hand, I do not want to belong to any group or community, on the other, I definitely belong to the Armed Forces of Ukraine"

Andrii emphasizes that the most important thing now is not to focus on personal issues, but to win the war. And what he is doing now gives him a sense of pride and belonging to the Ukrainian nation.

"I feel I am a part of Ukrainian society. The most important thing is the fate of Ukraine. Serving in the army has been very beneficial to me psychologically, in terms of improving myself. I believe that I have not lived my life in vain. I have learned to value myself, my experience, and my achievements"

Andrii does not seem to feel like he is part of an excluded group. His depression was more likely caused by the intersection of his personality traits and his non-traditional sexual orientation, which he is now reluctant to discuss. Today, he says, he has learned to bring his depression under control.

"As soon as I see that I have something similar to depression, I try to cheer myself up, eat something tasty, do interesting things. You prioritize yourself..."

For Andrii, prevention and reduction of social exclusion (this concept for Andrii has an individual character) can be by creating cultural and artistic centers, in which people of different ages are involved.

"The participation of people of all ages is essential, because the older you are, the more isolated you become.... I think the more different people involved in these activities, the better"

Our third participant was Mariia – a 60-year-old Russian-speaking woman from Kyiv who is fluent in Ukrainian. Outwardly, no different from Ukrainian-speaking inhabitants of the city, she nevertheless does not associate herself with modern Kyiv, which has become alien to her.

"I feel like a stranger in Kyiv, where I was born. I have always been surrounded by people of different nationalities who understood and valued each other for their character and dignity, not for their language. Today I feel like I am not in the city or the country where I was born"

She perceives the neglect or prohibition of Russian culture as violence, although she is not Russian. For her, the so-called Russian culture we were talking about was associated with Kyiv.

"Probably, it was the common culture that united us here. It was local Kyiv culture; we had no associations with Russia. Growing up with foundational world literature and poetry shaped our personalities, and Pushkin, Lermontov,

Esenin were among them. I am offended that what was once dear and close to me has suddenly become hostile and harmful. I do not reject other cultures, so why am I being denied mine?"

She interprets the language confrontation as an artificially created situation, comparing it to a fight over a paper map as if it were a real territory and noting that a very high price is paid by those who have nothing to do with it at all, that is, ordinary Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking people. Taking the language problem into a wider realm, Mariia argues that this is not so much a problem of language per se, but rather a social, political, and cultural problem.

"I am outraged that they threw the baby out with the bathwater. And someone has earned financial and social capital... Although they may not believe in what they stand for. People are simply being butted heads; and behind the scenes, completely different games are being played. And those top players do not care that people die every day, the country is being destroyed, and that human life is worthless"

Mariia pursues her scholarly career, participates in humanitarian projects; she gives the impression of an open-minded and sociable person. According to her, she does not feel socially excluded and she personally has never been rejected or marginalized based on her mother tongue. Mariia has only observed such conflicts on social media. However, today she cut herself off from extensive communication.

"I do not feel socially excluded. On the contrary, I am involved in many groups. I just do not believe in anything anymore... From my perspective, normal interaction is when you can be yourself without playing any roles and meeting someone's expectations; and mutual acceptance is a must. There is less and less of this now, so I try to distance myself from unnecessary communication. It is my own choice, even though I am not a classic introvert. But I just get tired of people"

Despite her disappointment, Mariia believes that the situation can be changed. She states that many people have lost meaning in life now; and therefore, systemic changes are needed at all levels and in all social institutions, starting with the family.

"We need to revise all levels of education; change the academic world, media resource; develop social, economic, cultural life, etc. We need political will. And first and foremost, we have to realize that every person holds inherent value, every person is a small universe inseparably linked to the infinite universe. As for small steps, we need centers where people can freely express themselves, their positions and be heard. Where everyone can identify him/herself not as They, but as We. Different cultures that enrich each other should be represented there"

The threat of social exclusion was much more serious in a conversation with internally displaced persons. This time, our participants were Nataliia (58 y. o.) and Oleh (70 y. o.), a married couple who moved to Kyiv from the Donetsk region. Being well-respected members of the community well prepared for retirement, they suddenly lost everything they had worked for all their lives. Describing her situation, Nataliia emphasizes the attitude towards them before and after the loss:

"On top of everything else, you lose your social position. My husband was a media personality, and everyone knew him. We could turn to people anytime, and the attitude was completely different. Before the war, we were working hard, renovating our house, preparing for retirement. If we had known there would be the war, we certainly would not have done what we did. This war took everything away"

Deprived of everything, hoping for help and understanding, Nataliia and Oleh encountered rejection and downright rude treatment from social services in Kyiv that deeply hurt them and made them feel homeless. Undisguised bitterness and resentment are evident in Nataliia's words:

"They treat you like "What are you doing here?" We were, excuse me, going from one stop to the next like homeless people... And when we left the office, I was hysterical; I could not stop myself; I was just bursting with rage. And you really do feel like you are homeless"

Indeed, homelessness is a significant risk factor for social exclusion; it affects both people without a roof over their heads and those living in unstable conditions. Homelessness also represents the absence or weakening of the connections that bind people together in a network of interconnected social structures. This ultimately leads to marginalization, including housing and financial difficulties, as well as non-participation in social and political life [33]. Describing their difficult emotional state during the first year and a half, Nataliia and Oleh spoke about their ordeals associated with compensation for lost housing, which, as it turned out, was not provided for them. They are elderly people with health issues, so finding work was also very difficult. They truly found themselves disconnected from life, with little hope and no plans for the future.

"This exclusion from social life offends people. We need to rent an apartment; we simply need to survive. People have a problem; the state draws up regulations, but cannot solve it. We have nothing. My husband had spinal surgery, so physical work is not an option. We do not know what to do. I cannot predict the future, I do not know what will happen tomorrow, because we have no solid ground"

Despite depression, despair and hopelessness, the couple found donors, and Oleh began publishing a newspaper, which he did in his hometown. The newspa-

per serves a tool for communication within their home community. This activity is aimed at restoring lost connections that Nataliia and Oleh are so deeply distressed about, and it fosters their sense of belonging to their community and, more broadly, to the Ukrainian society.

"We do everything we can for our society. We want our community to be united. And the newspaper unites us as a connecting link between people"

The couple emphasizes that people, who fled the war but did not lose their homes, do not understand a total loss. Nataliia and Oleh are very vocal about creating organizations for internally displaced persons where their specific problems would be understood and aid would be provided.

"It is important to create centers and organizations for internally displaced persons. Everyone has suffered, and they do not have a roof over their heads. Financial assistance is desperately needed, especially for large families, the disabled, and pensioners. After all, the worst thing is that they do not have home"

The fifth participant was 45-year-old Anna, who left Ukraine after the start of the large-scale invasion and settled in Belgium with her two children. She met her husband there, and they had a child. Today, she is a mother of three and a French language student. In Ukraine, she felt a sense of belonging to various social groups; she was active and energetic. Relocation to another country radically changed her perception of the world and her habitual way of life. Anna says she never truly became part of a new society. Her only contacts are her children and her husband.

"When you have friends and regular meetings, you feel like you belong to a group. For example, in Ukraine, I was a member of a parents' committee; we did things together for our children and for our school. Today I feel isolated; I am in a foreign country with a different mindset. Apart from my child's father, I hardly know anyone in this country, and I miss social interactions. I do not understand how to fit into this Belgian society"

Anna occasionally meets with her husband's family, but her lack of language skills makes communication difficult, and she feels excluded from the communication process.

"My husband's family members speak French. Sometimes I understand a little, and sometimes I do not understand at all. I feel isolated. If I had different communication and a different family, it would not hurt so much"

Another disappointment for Anna was the way her husband's family treated her during her pregnancy. According to her, no one paid special attention to her poor health. It was such a shock, since, she says, in Ukrainian families everyone asks how you are doing, but there, it is not customary.

"Lately, I have realized it is not just a language issue, but also that people genuinely do not care. I was so disappointed that no one supported me. There were emotions, thoughts, even physical sensations... I realize they are not my family anymore"

There had also been an incident at her job before the birth of her child. Although Anna thought she had a relatively smooth relationship, the sudden dismissal was like a cold shower. Having high hopes, striving to understand a different mindset and become part of a team, Anna experienced deep disappointment which negatively impacted her self-esteem and trust in people.

"I was really, really upset... I could not believe this was happening to me. It really hurt me that I could not get the results I wanted. I wanted the contract... It affected my self-confidence. It affected my trust in people. You have to understand that any employer tries to exploit you. And no one wants to help you; it is every man for himself"

Despite caring for her family and three children, Anna feels very lonely. Communication with Ukrainians also failed. She feels quite comfortable communicating with her fellow students, but she understands that this communication will end with the end of her studies.

"I do not feel like I belong to any group. I have really lost myself"

Anna experiences the invisible losses of emigration, which are now common to millions of Ukrainians who found themselves abroad due to the war. The loss of a sense of security, social status, belonging, sociocultural and linguistic environment generates anxiety, stress and can lead to psychological problems. Though this state does not fall under the definition of social exclusion, it can lead to it, as these symbolic losses may result in isolation and marginalization.

Each of the presented stories is in a way unique. Certainly, all participants were impacted by the war that has changed their life, beliefs, values, and goals. However, just as not everyone experiences post-traumatic stress disorder, not all people who have undergone the above-described life changes fall within the definition of socially excluded. In some cases, it is appropriate to speak not of social exclusion, but of social isolation, which has key differences from social exclusion, although it can act as a precursor to social exclusion.

Though both social exclusion and social isolation refer to situations in which people are detached from society, "social isolation is conceptualized and operationalized as an individual-level characteristic of being detached from social contacts, whereas social exclusion emphasizes broader and multifaceted or multidimensional societal conditions that produce poverty and inequality which reduce people's abilities to participate in society"

[34]. "Sorting" according to social inclusion/exclusion is always a collective process.

In contrast to social exclusion, social isolation (individual exclusion) is an individual process that is an individual-level characteristic of being separated from the community and having unsatisfactory social relationships. This concept is still much less debated in political and social contexts than social exclusion [34], however, it is also a significant determinant of physical and mental health [35].

Social isolation is defined as "a state in which the individual lacks a sense of belonging socially, lacks engagement with others, has a minimal number of social contacts, and they are deficient in fulfilling and quality relationships" [36]. Unlike social exclusion, which is always involuntary, social isolation can be voluntary and involuntary. Some people choose to limit their social interactions due to their personality type, for personal reflection and inner growth, or rest. Being a deliberate choice, social isolation (solitude, "me time") can be beneficial because it connects us with ourselves; it provides emotional and mental recharge, personal development, stimulates creativity, improves decision-making [37].

However, more often than not, people find themselves isolated involuntarily, due to external circumstances, such as the loss of loved ones, injury, physical disabilities, displacement, systemic social conditions. In this case, a person wants social interaction but cannot get it. Sometimes involuntary isolation is caused by deeply rooted fears such as social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, trauma, which makes communication painful [38]. Long-term involuntary isolation is widely recognized by psychologists as a major risk factor for deterioration of physical and mental well-being. Research demonstrates the negative impact of social isolation on the cardiovascular, immune, and neuroendocrine systems. Affecting mental health, social isolation causes depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, emotional distress, the development of dementia, premature death and poor health behaviors, sustained decreases in feelings of wellbeing [39; 40].

As can be seen from the participants' stories, all of them, to varying degrees, feel the negative impact of social isolation, but it cannot be said that any of them are systematically marginalized, subjected to systemic discrimination as members of a particular group, and forcibly deprived of access to necessary resources, opportunities, and social connections. While it is certainly true that a combination of social factors and their attitudes can determine exclusionary behavior and that characteristics specific to members of each of these groups may play a more important role in explaining the prevalence of these attitudes than individual traits,

however it does not necessarily mean social exclusion. This is evidenced by the statements of participants:

Exclusion is probably not a veteran problem, but rather my personal one (Ihor)

In my case, exclusion is individual, when you somehow forcibly limit yourself, or are ashamed, or are in such a depressive state (Andrii)

I do not feel socially excluded. It is my own desire to be alone (Mariia)

We cannot predict the future, because we do not know what will happen, because we have no solid ground... But we feel, of course, part of society. We are part of the Ukrainian people (Nataliia i Oleh)

I miss social interaction. I have been excluded because I do not know the language and have a different mentality. I have not formed my own social circle yet (Anna)

Although the participants do not exhibit pronounced social exclusion as a result of their existential and social experiences of the war, they are still at risk and may ultimately form socially excluded groups. Therefore, today it is necessary to pay close attention to people experiencing social isolation to ensure that they do not join the ranks of socially excluded groups. To deal with this pressing issue, it is necessary to develop a multidimensional approach that is tailored to individual needs and that addresses both psychological and social aspects. It seems reasonable to take into account the ideas of the interview participants on how to improve the current situation (specialized centers that meet the needs of the groups).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Narrative interviews were conducted with only a few participants, who could potentially represent different socially excluded groups. Hence, caution should be taken with generalizing the findings. At the same time, this study may provide an avenue for more complex, transdisciplinary research at the intersection of mental health, psychology, sociology, public administration, political science, and philosophy.

CONCLUSIONS

Being one of determinants of mental health, social exclusion has become increasingly widespread in Ukraine, and the ongoing war has given rise to new groups that are currently most susceptible to social exclusion. During narrative interviews aimed at uncovering the experiences of Ukrainians who may fall into these groups, it was found that participants do not consider themselves socially excluded, although everyone talks about voluntary or

involuntary social isolation that negatively affects or may affect their mental health and well-being. The narratives illustrate not only experiences of social isolation, but also the ways in which participants propose to address the unmet needs of individuals suffering from social isolation.

Addressing social exclusion and social isolation requires a combination of systemic policies (anti-discrimination laws, economic reforms, inclusive public

infrastructure) aimed at tackling social exclusion and impactful interventions (mental health support, relationship building, community groups, etc.) designed for confronting social isolation. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a long-term transdisciplinary strategy that would take into account both actual mechanisms operating in the context of social exclusion and intervention measures at the level of social isolation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The Authors declare no conflict of interest

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