

THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHRONIC AND SITUATIONAL  
LONELINESS TO SOCIAL SKILLS AND  
SOCIAL SENSITIVITY

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THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHRONIC AND SITUATIONAL  
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BY

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the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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## ABSTRACT

Based on the previous literature, loneliness is defined as a discrepancy, in which the person's achieved level of social relationships is smaller or less satisfying than he or she desires. The viewpoint developed in the current study suggests that loneliness may be the result of personal factors, and thus a chronic trait, or a result of situational variables, and a more temporary state. An argument was developed for associating chronic loneliness, but not situational loneliness, with a social skills, social sensitivity deficit. Specifically, differential use of influence attempts, conforming behavior, receptive and expressive non-verbal communication, and self-monitoring of expressive behavior were examined. Eleven hypotheses, derived from both the conceptual framework and supporting literature, were tested.

Subjects were selected for the study based on their responses to the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau and Heim, 1978). Female introductory psychology students (N = 342) responded to the scale twice--once as they felt over the past two weeks, and once as they felt in general throughout their lives. Those who fitted into experimental categories: chronic lonely (high on both scales); situational lonely (high on recent but low on general loneliness); or

non-lonely (low on both scales), were asked to participate in the experiment. A final group of 74 subjects performed a number of tasks to provide dependent measures in three broad categories: six social influence measures, two measures of compliance, and six measures having to do with expressive communication.

The set of dependent measures pertaining to the subjects' use of different bases of social influence was obtained via a case-history technique. This yielded scores based on French and Raven's model, reflecting use of personal reward, concrete reward, personal coercion, concrete coercion, reference, and no action. The compliance measures consisted of conformity in an Asch situation using the Muller-Lyer illusion as stimulus material, and susceptibility to reinforcement in a verbal conditioning task. The six expressive communication measures were obtained by (a) having subjects react to one set of six slides showing only a stimulus person's face; (b) videotaping subjects' expressive behavior during exposure to a second set of slides and having other subjects decode this behavior (a method developed by Buck, 1972); and (c) having subjects complete the Snyder (1974) Self-Monitoring Scale. The six measures derived from these tasks were as follows: (1) each subject's tendency to spontaneously attribute emotion to facial stimuli; (2) each subject's ability to transmit to other subjects a facial expression reflective of the pleasantness she is

experiencing; (3) each subject's ability to emit a facial expression reflective of the content category of the slide being observed; (4) each subject's ability to detect from a videotape of the encoder's expressive behavior, the pleasantness of the stimulus slide the original observer was viewing when the videotape was recorded; (5) the category of stimulus slide being viewed; and (6) each subject's score on the Self-Monitoring Scale.

Hypotheses were tested, using one-way analyses of variance, with subject's loneliness status--chronic, situational or non-lonely--as the independent variable. Of these major planned analyses, three ANOVAS yielded significant differences between groups. With regard to influence strategies, it was found that the non-lonelys made significantly greater use of referent power than did the chronic or situationally lonely individuals. When scores on the various power bases were combined to form an overall assertiveness measure, a trend ( $p < .14$ ) emerged, indicating that the lonely groups tended to use non-assertive influence strategies as compared to the non-lonely group. In general, the analyses of conformity measures did not support the hypotheses. When the two groups of lonely subjects were combined, a near significant trend indicated that, contrary to what was predicted, lonely females were less conforming on the Asch conformity test than the non-lonely females.

There was a main effect of loneliness on sender

accuracy in the expressiveness measures, both for category accuracy and for pleasantness accuracy: the situational lonelies were more readable than either the chronic lonelies or the non-lonelies. Receptive accuracy and Self-Monitoring scores showed no group differences, indicating that differences in expressiveness were in spontaneous, relatively uncontrolled, rather than controlled aspects.

The results were discussed in terms of their implications for a chronic-situational categorization of loneliness. It was suggested that situational loneliness may either be an early stage of chronic loneliness and therefore more aroused, or increased expressiveness may be a characteristic which keeps the situational lonely from becoming a chronic lonely. The evidence regarding social skills, as well as the expressiveness data, contrasted with studies on depression, and pointed out some critical differences between the two. Loneliness was seen as clearly differentiated from depression, and worth exploring as a distinct theoretical entity.

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## CHAPTER I

### LONELINESS

". . . The fun that everyone else is having is particularly visible. One walks, is not so often in the protective shell of a car--and too often one walks behind a charming couple holding hands. In the hallway of a building the laughter and arguments of other people's lives can be heard. . . . And of course there are always the newspaper columns--convenient daily reminders of the gatherings other people were invited to.

"Being lonely would be easier to bear if one could just admit it. But instead it is a dirty secret--a sign of weakness; worse, of unpopularity. . . ." (Ephron, 1978, p. 40)

This description of a lonely New Yorker could equally well apply to countless North Americans. Loneliness, experienced by everybody at some point in their life, can be one of the most painful experiences felt. Loneliness--experienced by children, adolescents, adults, and the aged--is becoming increasingly prevalent, as more and more people are living alone or in smaller-than-formerly families. People are marrying later, having fewer children, divorcing more often, and moving greater distances away from home.

The degree to which we all depend on social interactions is well known. On a very basic level, both human babies and monkeys may die if they are deprived of early social contact. At best they will grow up deficient of the normal skills necessary to survive. The early work by Spitz (1945) on hospitalized children, deprived of meaningful social

contact, demonstrated the importance of socialization in the development of intellectual and even physical capacities, not to mention the ability to interact in social situations later in life.

On a less extreme level, not enough social contact can affect learning processes, since much of what is "appropriate behavior" is learned through modelling others. Social contacts are necessary for getting jobs. People who are married tend to be more acceptable to others than those who are single in adulthood, and during adolescence, the "boyfriend" or "girlfriend" are necessary appendages to a socially acceptable teenager. In part, the lonely person not only suffers from his or her lack of contacts with others; there are also success and failure implications in the state of loneliness.

The pervasiveness of loneliness has been established by Bradburn (1969), who found 26% of his American sample reported recently feeling lonely. In a survey conducted by the student health service at a large American university campus, 116 undergraduates ranked 16 common health problems in terms of their occurrence among students. Loneliness was rated as fifth most common, "winning out" over drinking, smoking, and sexual adjustment. More than 70% of the students surveyed indicated loneliness as a serious problem, with 10% listing it as the most problematic for them (Pep-lau, Russell and Heim, 1978).

But despite the pervasiveness of loneliness, little work has been done in researching it (Weiss, 1973; Peplau et al., 1977). In this regard, Leiderman (1969, p. 155) noted,

Considering the fact that psychiatrists, as a group, are not reluctant to deal with and write about contemporary issues, one might reasonably expect loneliness to be mentioned frequently in the psychiatric literature. However, examination of this literature reveals few papers on this subject.

One might infer from this that practitioners are at a loss as to what to do with their patients who complain of loneliness, and in fact Burnside (1971) notes that health professionals may actually avoid the lonely. In addition, Gordon (1975) notes that there appears to exist a taboo in western societies against the discussion of social failure situations; presumably this taboo is carried over into scientific research.

In addition to these more personal reasons for avoiding the topic of loneliness, there has until recently been no published loneliness scale, nor a theoretical formulation about loneliness which was conducive to the generation of research. However, during the past year or two, both the theoretical (Peplau and Perlman, 1977, Note 2; Peplau, Russell and Heim, 1977), and the methodological groundwork (Russell, Peplau and Ferguson, 1978), for studying loneliness have been laid. The present study built on that foundation.

Loneliness is defined in terms of a discrepancy, in which the person's achieved level of social relationships is smaller or less satisfying than he or she desires. Loneliness, by this formulation, may be the result of personal variables (a chronic "trait"), or a result of situational variables (in which case it will be a more temporary "state"), or an interaction of the two.

The present study examined the relationship between loneliness and social skills. It was hypothesized that loneliness is a social deficiency in the sense that the individual who feels lonely is unable to achieve his or her level of desired social contact. In more behavioral terms, the lonely individual does not emit the appropriate behaviors to elicit social reinforcement. Particularly in the case of chronic loneliness, but perhaps not so clearly in the case of temporary loneliness, I expected to find a social skills deficit. Specifically, two issues were addressed: how do chronic and situational loneliness differ with regard to social skills, and how do social skills enter into the state of loneliness. I empirically examined differential use of influence attempts, conforming behavior, receptive and expressive non-verbal communication, and self-monitoring of expressive behavior.

The following chapter consists of three major parts: first, a review of the loneliness literature to date and a discussion of the conceptual viewpoint which underlies the



research; second, a review of the relevant research on the dependent variables; and third, a summary of the hypotheses in this study.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

#### Loneliness Defined

The current definition of loneliness is based on a description by Sermat (1973), who notes that the

. . . intensity of loneliness is proportional to the discrepancy which an individual perceives to exist between the kinds of interpersonal relationships he sees himself as having at the time, and the kinds of relationships he sees as desirable, or would ideally like to have.

Loneliness here is defined as a social deficiency; it exists to the extent that a person's network of social relationships is smaller or less satisfying than that person desires (Peplau and Perlman, Note 1). Such a definition focuses on the relationship between two factors: the desired and achieved levels of an individual's social interaction.

Loneliness, as theorists generally concur (e.g., Ortego, 1969; Weiss, 1973; Peplau and Perlman, 1977), and as existing evidence suggests (Peplau et al., 1979), is associated with negative affect. It has been characterized by writers as "a gnawing . . . chronic distress without redeeming features" (Weiss, 1973); Ortega (1969) notes that ". . . Unhappiness is looking without finding. Loneliness is not even knowing where to look--the lonely person not

only feels lost, but also is quite sure no-one is looking out for him." A grade 10 student, writing about her loneliness, said,

Loneliness gives one a cold feeling like the loneliness the earth feels in winter when the birds and flowers have left her, and I feel as though I don't have a friend in the world. The whole house is lifeless now and that makes me feel depressed. Depression is truly a part of loneliness (Moustakas, 1972, p. 48).

Indeed, the link between loneliness and depression has been repeatedly confirmed in both clinical observations and empirical studies (Liederman, 1969; Ortega, 1969; Weissman and Paykel, 1973).

One of the contradictions in the loneliness literature is the viewpoints on the motivational manifestations of loneliness. On the one hand, Sullivan (1953) considers loneliness to be arousing. He is supported by Weiss (1973), who sees loneliness as generating a vigilance about interpersonal relationships, producing an oversensitivity to minimal cues. On the other hand, Fromm-Reichman (1959) and others (Liederman, 1969; Ortega, 1969) in linking loneliness with depression, implicitly or explicitly imply that loneliness decreases motivation. Given the present viewpoint we believe that different attributions about the causes of one's loneliness may determine whether loneliness increases or decreases motivation. However, before presenting this resolution of the controversy, an introduction to causal attributions vis-a-vis loneliness is in order.