

Contact and Intimacy Patterns of Lonely Students*

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This study examined the relationship between loneliness, sex difference and social network. Loneliness scores, self-reported social network size, amount of contact and intimacy were obtained for 77 under 25 year old psychology students at University. Males evidenced greater loneliness than females. Network size was only significantly smaller for lonely males. Lonely students reported higher contact and lower intimacy with family and lower contact and intimacy with close and other friends than did non-lonely students. The results are discussed in terms of the development of relationships in New Zealand young people.

In recent times research has shown that a large number of people in Western society are lonely, and that loneliness is connected to many individual and social problems (Newcomb & Bentler, 1987). Loneliness is an adverse experience, similar to negative states such as depression and anxiety. It is distinct from social isolation and reflects a perception concerning deficiencies in the person's relationship network. It has been suggested that loneliness may be quantitative or qualitative, depending on whether it results from a lack of friends or a lack of intimacy (Russell, Cutrona, Rose & Yurko, 1984). Everybody has a need for friends, and they help to foster feelings of security and acceptance. New Zealand society today places an emphasis on making friends and relating well to others, and this promotes a desire to be popular.

Social support refers to the 'personal relationship network which provides companionship, assistance, attachment and emotional nourishment' (Newcomb & Bentler, 1987). The results of many studies have shown that lonely people report both smaller social networks and less support. A negative association has been found between family and friend support, perhaps because attachment to one system is detrimental to the other. Levin and Stokes (1986) examined the correlation between loneliness and network size, number of confidants, frequency of social support and percentage of relatives in the group. Results showed that those with a high percentage of relatives in their support network reported being more lonely, and non-relative support dimin-

ished lonely feeling more effectively. This finding can be explained by Kelly's attribution theory, because relative support is attributed to ascribed roles and non-relative support to self-merit and therefore non-relative support is likely to be more satisfying (Levin & Stokes, 1986).

It was the aim of the present study to replicate these findings in a New Zealand sample of young people. Further, sex differences were examined since on the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale men have been found to express more loneliness than women (see Schulz & Moore, 1986). The relationship between social contact and loneliness was marked for males, while for females there was higher correlation between self-disclosure and loneliness. Such differences are likely to occur in New Zealand young people because males tend to have many 'mates', (friends of same sex sharing common interests at a low level of intimacy), whereas females are more likely to have a few close friends. From a young age boys are expected to have a larger group of friends than girls. They tend to play more outside games requiring more people, and friendships are based more on doing things together, with an emphasis on achievement and competition. On the other hand, girls have smaller, more exclusive groups of friends. They are more likely to confide in their peers, and seek commitment, security and intimacy (Epstein & Karweit, 1983).

The aim of this study is to investigate further the link between friendship patterns and reported loneliness. The following hypotheses were put forward:

- a) those reporting smaller social networks will be more lonely,

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- b) those who report more contact and intimacy with family will be more lonely,
- c) males will report being lonelier than females.
- d) intimacy of friendship will have more of an effect on loneliness in females and contact or number of acquaintances will have more influence on loneliness in males.

Method

Subjects

Students from an introductory psychology course at the University of Waikato were selected on the basis that they were between the ages of 18 and 25 years, unmarried, not living at home or in the halls of residence and who were full time students. There were 40 females and 32 males, 92% of which were Caucasian.

Procedure

The subjects as a group were asked to fill out the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau & Cutrona, 1980), followed by a Social Contact Survey to examine the naturally occurring patterns of social interactions. The latter asked subjects to list their close friendship, other friends, family, other relatives and other important people by writing the christian name or some initials that they alone could identify. They were then asked to go back over their list and in the columns provided rate each of the persons they had named firstly according to the amount of contact they had had with them over the past 3 months on a 0-6 scale and secondly on the basis of the degree of intimacy they normally shared from 0-6. The subjects were debriefed with some analysis and discussion of some preliminary results.

Results

The loneliness scores ranged from 21-64 with a mean of 35.65 and standard deviation of 5.75. The average score for males was 39.8 and was significantly different from the female average of 32.4, $t(75)=4.8$, $p < .001$. A median split at 40 was used to divide the sample into a high and low loneliness group. There were 26 lonely males and 14 females.

Loneliness was not related to size of social network for females but lonely males listed significantly fewer people than other males, $t(35)=2.98$, $p < .01$. Lonely males also listed almost the same number of friends as family while the other three groups listed at least twice as many friends as family.

Lonely students reported a larger average number of family members which they had high

contact with, $t(38)=2.53$, $p < .05$, although they reported less intimacy, $t(38) = 3.60$, $p < .01$. Both lonely males and females reported lower intimacy, $t(38)=3.1$, $p < .01$, and contact with close friends and other friends, $t(38)= 3.40$, $p < .01$. Overall however females had higher contact and intimacy with both friends and family than did males.

For size of social network, overall intimacy level was found to be related to loneliness in both females, $\psi^2 = 8.73$, $p < .01$ and males $\psi^2 = 6.21$, $p < .05$, but contact was not significant for either group.

Discussion

The first hypothesis, that those with smaller social networks would be more lonely, was supported only for males. On the whole the content of the social network appeared to be more important than the size of it. The second hypothesis was that those who have more contact and intimacy with family will be more lonely. It was found that lonely subjects did report higher contact with family, but their average intimacy with family was no higher than for non-lonely subjects.

It was expected that intimacy of friendship would have more of an effect on loneliness with females, and that contact would be more important with males. This prediction was supported to some extent with lonely males listing fewer friends than the non-lonely males, while both groups of females listed about the same number of people. Within the female group the non-lonely had more other friends who they were intimate with, than the lonely. However, while contact and intimacy were found to be related, contact with friends and family was also important to females. Nevertheless for both sexes intimacy was more closely associated with loneliness, since even for students with a high amount of contact with people, loneliness was likely if there was a general lack of intimacy in those relationships.

The prediction that males are more likely to be lonely than females was supported. Intimate friendships for men were not common, and their relationships with females was not usually reported as intimate. In NZ society women have the traditional role of nurturers, and they depend more on each other as friends. Men, however, are taught more independence and competitiveness, and they can experience

loneliness because they generally do not have deep and sharing friendships (Block & Greenberg, 1985).

While generalisation from the small and restricted student sample used in the present study is inadvisable, most of the results confirm previous studies. The New Zealand students expressed considerable loneliness and the choice of contact, amount, and intimacy level in their social networks reflected this. It is suggested that counselling programmes, especially directed toward males, which aim at increasing support network size and the ability to share intimately would go a long way to reduce lonely feelings in young people.

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