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Loneliness: How Superficial Relationships, Identity Gaps, and Social Support Contribute to Feelings of Loneliness at Pepperdine University

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the relationship between feelings of loneliness and the amount of self- disclosure in relationships, inconsistencies in the portrayal of an individual's identity to other people, and the amount of social support felt in relationships. This study addresses feelings of loneliness reported in freshman students at Pepperdine University. Our findings suggest that deficiencies in self- disclosure negatively correlated with feelings of loneliness, as did feelings of a stronger social support system exhibit a negative correlation, but a positive impact among students in response to feelings of loneliness. Identity gaps were also found to be a prominent factor in feelings of loneliness.

Keywords: loneliness, self- disclosure, identity gaps, social support.

Loneliness: How Superficial Relationships, Identity Gaps, and Social Support Contribute to Feelings of Loneliness at Pepperdine University

Growth and change during college years produces a variety of feelings in students. In addition to feelings of excitement and anticipation, there may also be feelings of loneliness. A study conducted by Ross, Niebling, and Heckert (1999) indicated that the top five sources of stress among college students are changes in sleeping habits, vacation/ breaks, change in eating habits, increased work load, and new responsibilities. Ross and colleagues (1999) concluded that if stress is not dealt with in an effective way, feelings of loneliness might occur. These stressors are found in universities across the country, including the unique culture and climate of Pepperdine University, which leads one to believe that feelings of loneliness are also present among students here. McWhirter (1997) states that as many as 30% of college students report experiencing loneliness and describes how intimate and social loneliness are found to be experienced among college students. Some variables that contribute to feelings of loneliness, such as entering into a new environment upon starting college, ineffectively handling stressful situations, and feelings of dissatisfaction in relationships, can be noted specifically among first year college students. This study will explore the social penetration theory and discuss the role of identity gaps and social support in regards to reported feelings of loneliness.

Review of Literature

Social Penetration Theory

Self- Disclosure is an essential factor that facilitates interpersonal relations and can diminish the likelihood of loneliness when there is reciprocity of the sharing of information between the people in a relationship (Berg & Peplau, 1982). The function of self-disclosure is

explained by social penetration theory by Altman & Taylor (1987). Social penetration theory identifies stages through which relationships develop (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). The Orientation stage is like a casual meet and greet where the conversation doesn't go past small talk. The Exploratory- affective stage allows for self- disclosure between two people because the conversation lends itself toward more in-depth conversation and the sharing of personal beliefs and attitudes on multiple topics. Social penetration theory explains that self-disclosure is what creates varying degrees of intimacy within relationships (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Taylor and Altman (1987) argued that self-disclosure is particularly important in the initial stages of a relationship as partners search for similarities and compatibilities.

In order to progress through the multiple stages of a relationship, the breadth and depth of self- disclosure must consistently complement each other. The variety of topics that are discussed from individual's lives is what constitutes breadth, and depth is the details and amount of information that is discussed on those topics. The amount of both breadth and depth increase as a relationship progresses. These theoretical explanations lead us to believe that superficial relationships, relationships that lack depth and maintain only a consistent amount of breadth, contribute to the stagnation of the relationship and may ultimately lead to feelings of loneliness. Wheelless, Zakahi, and Chan (1988) studied the effects of loneliness and self-disclosure based on perceptions and masculine and feminine cues. After discussing the differences between disclosure levels of men and women, the researchers commented on the impressions self-disclosure has on feelings of loneliness. Their research concluded that the greater amount of self-disclosure reciprocated, the less lonely the person. Wheelless, Zakahi, and Chan (1988) supported the idea that the dimension of honesty and self- disclosure is correlated to perception of the individual's loneliness.

Researchers have identified how the amount of breadth and depth individuals are willing to reveal determines their organizational worth. Specifically Myers and Johnson (2004) examined organizational peer relationships and the function that they play in self-disclosure and the adaptation to an organizational environment. They note that peer relationships are essential to the socialization process of an organization where three types of peers are found. An information peer who sticks strictly to information about the workplace; the collegial peer who adds more self-disclosure of family situations along with work-related events; and the special peer who provides emotional support, personal feedback, and serves as a friend (Myers & Johnson, 2004). Looking at universities, there are the same types of peers. From the information peer being the relationship with the most breadth and no depth (superficial relationship), to the special peer where there is a consistent amount of self-disclosure along with breadth and depth. Examining self-disclosure in an organizational environment, such as a university, gives support to the findings that the variable of superficial relationships is connected with reported feelings of loneliness because according to Berg and Peplau (1982), people who are unwilling to reveal themselves and who receive little personal information from others may find their relationships less satisfying and are more prone to loneliness.

Identity Gaps

A university setting, particularly for freshman in college, encompasses an entirely new world of possibilities to recreate one's self and get involved in multiple activities that contribute to a new identity being formed, which may lead to a varying representation of who an individual truly is. An element that seems to go along with the newness of a university setting are inconsistencies in an individual's self-esteem and inconsistencies in the way they present themselves to other people (Murray & Kennedy-Lightsey, 2013). When college students enact

different identities by succumbing to the pressures of their peers, or when students are inconsistent in the way they present themselves to their peers in order to fulfill certain expectations, these inconsistencies are what constitute identity gaps.

Researchers have found that university life and certain personality types make certain people more prone to experiencing identity gaps. Kaufman and Feldman (2004) studied the formation of students' identities by interviewing 82 randomly selected college students. The researchers considered college an arena of social interaction in which the individual comes in contact with a multitude of actors in various settings and argued that it is through these social interactions that the identities of individuals are, in part, constituted. They found that college students were likely to gain their self-concept in the domains of intelligence and knowledgeability, occupation, and cosmopolitanism. The researchers also found that as their worldviews and beliefs were challenged in the new environment of a university, college student's self-perceptions were more likely to change. These changes could be positive or negative; positive in a sense that a person may not take these shifts in beliefs or worldview as an alteration or inconsistency in their self-perception. A person's sense of self may be negatively affected if they are struggling to identify with the overall university community (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004).

Murray and Kennedy-Lightsey (2013) found that self-esteem is a significant predictor in identity gaps. In their study, 209 undergraduate students self-reported on their communication with other students, faculty, and peers at the university. Murray and Kennedy-Lightsey (2013) concluded that students who lack self-esteem and are not their genuine selves are at a greater risk of experiencing the negative effects that go along with identity gaps. For college students, because it is so easy to get involved in everything that schools have to offer, one's sense of self

can be lost in the five to ten things they identify themselves with. This previous research contributes to our idea that the inconsistencies in a person's self-esteem and presentation of their identity to others, which produce identity gaps, may be associated with increased feelings of loneliness.

Social Support

Conversely, the social support literature shows the positive impact that a solid foundation of social support can have on one's well being. Edwards, Rose, Edwards and Singer (2008) refer to social support as perceptual evaluations of the availability and quality of one's social support system. Social support is the idea of the individual believing that they are cared for, loved, and that they belong. Edwards and colleagues (2008) recruited 124 students from an introductory speech class at a university to take a survey asking questions regarding message design logics of the individual, a social support assessment, and loneliness of the individual. The researchers found that both social support and loneliness are a significant factor of one's overall social and emotional health. According to Edwards, Rose, Edwards and Singer (2008), a positive evaluation of social support is a result of effective communication, and when an individual feels as though they are valued and satisfied with their relationships, this directly affects their emotional well-being.

The amount of social support in an individual's life is related to their feelings of life satisfaction. Langford, Bowsher, Maloney, and Lillis (1997) identified the defining attributes of social support: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal, and although their research was specifically among an older generation, the thoughts the researchers have on social support lend some insight into the link between the amounts of social support in an individual's life and how that influences the amount of reported loneliness by students in college. A social support

system contributing to an individual's well-being gives understanding to the fact that when an individual has a solid group of people they can rely on, it is less likely that feelings of loneliness will be reported.

Loneliness

Feelings of loneliness exist within every age group, but appear to be more prominent among young adults. Loneliness reflects an interpersonal deficit that is present due to a lack of satisfying personal relationships. Perlman and Peplau (1981) view loneliness as a discrepancy between one's desired and achieved levels of social relations. Loneliness can be seen as temporary state, connected to events like moving to a new community (i.e. freshman leaving home to come to college), it can be more of a chronic trait in which an individual can be a lonely person, or there can be more social deficiency involved. Perlman and Peplau (1981) discuss emotional loneliness, the absence of a personal, intimate relationship, and social loneliness, which is the struggle to connect or find a sense of community.

Feelings described as social loneliness, discussed by Perlman and Peplau (1981), are more likely to be found among college students because college students are often times removed from their comfort zones and forced to assimilate in a new environment. For many college students this can be very difficult. Ponzetti (1990) reviewed research concerning loneliness among college students and then suggested remedial and preventive strategies to family life specialists. Many factors ranging from shyness, low self-esteem, mistrust, unfriendly communication styles, and even the size of a student's social network have been linked to feelings of loneliness among college students (Ponzetti, 1990). He also discussed the concept of learned helplessness, when individuals experience loss of control and they begin to internalize feelings of distrust and self-derogation. College students tend to exhibit these learned

helplessness characteristics especially during the inevitably stressful situations that arise in college. These findings by Ponzetti (1990) shed light on the unique environment of Pepperdine, the stressors that arise especially during a student's freshman year, and the feelings of loneliness that may arise within college freshman.

Hypotheses

These previous studies are part of the literature found on the connection between the ideas of self-disclosure and superficial relationships, identity gaps, and loneliness, and provide a foundation for the following hypotheses:

H1: Individuals who have more superficial relationships will report more feelings of loneliness.

H2: Individuals who are less consistent in presenting their true identity will report more feelings of loneliness.

H3: Conversely, individuals who report having a strong social support system will report less feelings of loneliness.

Method

Participants and Procedure

A convenience sample of 52 first-year students (65.4% female and 34.6% male) between the ages of 18 and 19 ($M = 18.19$, $SD = .39$) at Pepperdine University, a small Christian university located in southern California participated in a cross-sectional survey study that assessed levels of self-disclosure, sense of identity, evaluation of social support, and feelings of loneliness. The online questionnaire was emailed to Resident Advisors of freshmen halls who then distributed it to their residents.

Materials

Other than the electronic SurveyMonkey.com website service that was used to create and administer and study questionnaire, there were no additional costs for this study and no materials were needed.

Measures

Self- Disclosure. Self- disclosure was assessed using the intended disclosure, control of depth, and honesty factors of the Five Dimensions of Self-disclosure Scale developed by Wheelless and Grotz (1977). Participants were asked to respond to a total of 12 Likert-type items (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*) Intended disclosure was measured with questions such as, “When I wish, my self-disclosures are always accurate reflections of who I really am,” and “When I express my personal feelings, I am always aware of what I am doing and saying.” Control of depth was measured with questions like, “I intimately disclose who I really, am, openly and fully in my conversation.” Honesty and accuracy of disclosure was measured with questions such as, “I cannot reveal myself when I want to because I do not know myself thoroughly enough” (reverse coded).

Identity Gaps. Participants were asked to report their perceived identity gaps or their sense of identity and possible inconsistencies in the way they portray themselves to peers using the 11 item Personal-Enacted Identity Gap Scale by Jung and Hecht (2004) (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree). Example items included “When communicating with my communication peers, I often lose sense of who I am” and “There is a difference between the real me and the impression I give my communication peers about me.”

Social Support. Social Support was assessed with 12 Likert-type items (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree) from the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List by Cohen and

Hoberman (1983) that measures tangible belonging, self-esteem, and appraisal support, Example items included, “If I wanted do have lunch with someone, I could easily find someone to join me,” and “There is someone who takes pride in my accomplishments.”

Loneliness. Loneliness was measured using the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau, & Ferguson, 1978). Respondents answered 20 Likert-type questions (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree) in order to determine if there was a “discrepancy between one’s desired and achieved levels of social relations” (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Questions included, “My social relationships are superficial,” and “No one really knows me well, “with high agreement indicating a high level of loneliness.

Demographics. Participants were asked to report their gender, age, whether or not they were a transfer student, and the location of their dorm on campus. 73.1% of participants live on Lower Dorm Road and 26.9% of participants live on Upper Dorm Road of Pepperdine University.

Results

H1: The first hypothesis predicted that individuals who have more superficial relationships will report more feelings of loneliness. A correlation was computed by comparing the mean self-disclosure value and the mean loneliness value. Based on the data in our sample, the correlation between self- disclosure and loneliness was $r = -.21$. Thus, because this is an inverse relationship showing that as self- disclosure goes up, loneliness goes down, this hypothesis was supported.

H2: The second hypothesis predicted that individuals who are less consistent in presenting their true identity will report more feelings of loneliness. A correlation was computed by comparing the mean identity gap value and the mean loneliness value. Based on the data in our sample, the correlation between identity gaps and loneliness was $r = .63$. Thus, because this is a positive

correlation, showing that as identity gaps increased, loneliness also increased, this hypothesis was supported.

H3: The third hypothesis predicted that conversely, individuals who report having a strong social support system will report less feelings of loneliness. A correlation was computed by comparing the mean social support value and the mean loneliness value. Based on the data in our sample, the correlation between social support and loneliness was $r = -.77$. Thus, because feelings of loneliness decreased as social support increased, making this a negative correlation, this hypothesis was supported.

Discussion

Implications

Based on previous research that emphasized the prominence of loneliness among young adults, specifically college students, it was interesting to find that among the freshman class here at Pepperdine University, the mean loneliness score was only 2.06. Despite our hypotheses being supported, showing increased self-disclosure contributing to lower feelings of loneliness, an increase in identity gaps leading to an increase in reported feelings of loneliness, and a stronger social support system indicating fewer feelings of loneliness, we can conclude that the freshman class here at Pepperdine University are not very lonely. This may be due to the fact that they have not had enough time to truly experience feelings of loneliness. In this unique culture, especially during freshman year, one can blink and the year is already over. Freshman students have a fantastic integration period at new student orientation before classes even start, freshman resident advisors and spiritual life advisors are trained and dedicated to provide an atmosphere that is homey in order to specifically decrease feelings of loneliness, and a majority of freshman students also apply and start preparing to go abroad the following year. The results indicate that

though a lack of self- disclosure and social support are found, and identity gaps are present, the majority of the freshmen at Pepperdine are in fact not lonely.

Strengths and Weaknesses

A few of the weaknesses found by the end of our research included using a convenience sample, which didn't allow us to generalize our results to a larger audience of college students besides specifically the freshman here at Pepperdine. We also used a survey to conduct our research, which didn't allow us to make any causal claims. The positive, strengths of our study included having a variety check questions that were reverse coded in the self- disclosure, identity gap, and social support sections. This allowed us to measure the reliability of the responses we received on the surveys.

Future Research

For future research, researchers should include a larger representative sample size consisting of upperclassman as well as freshman. It would be beneficial to compare the different years of college students in order to have a better idea of when loneliness is most prominent among college students. Particularly at Pepperdine, maybe loneliness occurs after freshman year in older students after they have been here longer, possibly when students get back from abroad and have to readjust to the culture again.

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