



The development of loneliness from mid- to late adolescence: Trajectory classes, personality traits, and psychosocial functioning



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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Loneliness
Trajectories
Personality traits
Depression
Self-esteem
Anxiety

Although loneliness is a common problem across late adolescence, its developmental course has not been investigated in depth in this period of life. The present study aims to fill this gap by means of a five-wave cohort-sequential longitudinal study spanning ages 15 to 20 ($N = 389$). Both variable-centered (i.e., latent growth curve modeling) and person-centered (i.e., latent class growth analysis) approaches were used. Variable-centered analyses showed that loneliness generally decreased over time. Person-centered analyses pointed to considerable inter-individual differences in the development of loneliness, and identified five trajectory classes (i.e., stable low, low increasing, moderate decreasing, high increasing, and chronically high). These five trajectory classes were differentially related to personality traits at age 15 (i.e., extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability) and psychosocial functioning at age 20 (i.e., depressive symptoms, self-esteem, anxiety, and perceived stress). These findings underscore the additional value of studying subgroups regarding the development of loneliness.

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Introduction

During mid- to late adolescence, there is an increased need to form intimate peer relationships (Buhrmester, 1990). Hence, an important developmental task in this period of life is establishing close relationships with peers (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). A lack of intimate peer relationships, however, may result in loneliness. Loneliness is defined as the negative emotional response to a discrepancy between the desired and achieved quality of one's social network (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Given the increased capacity for intimacy, loneliness, in general, is expected to decrease from mid- to late adolescence. However, not all adolescents succeed in establishing intimate and satisfying peer relationships. Consequently, individual differences in the development of loneliness may emerge over time. To date, no studies have examined the developmental course of loneliness from mid- to late adolescence, including the transition from high school to the work or university context. The present study addresses this particular gap by applying both variable-centered and person-centered analytical techniques in a cohort-sequential study spanning ages 15 to 20.

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Developmental course of loneliness across adolescence

Although longitudinal studies covering ages 15 to 20 are lacking, a review of cross-sectional studies confirmed the expected decreasing developmental trend from mid- to late adolescence (Marcoen & Goossens, 1993). In addition to the hypothesized general decreasing trend in loneliness, we expected substantial inter-individual differences as adolescents do not all develop in the same direction (e.g., Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2008). Hence, using appropriate statistical methods, such as latent class growth analysis (Nagin, 2005), several trajectory classes may be identified, each with their own specific developmental trend that possibly diverges from the average trend.

Recent longitudinal research has increasingly focused on loneliness trajectories. A first study found three loneliness trajectories in the third through fifth grade, that is, a stable low, an increasing, and a decreasing group (Jobe-Shields, Cohen, & Parra, 2011). A second study with Latino participants identified three loneliness trajectory classes in the first two years of high school. These trajectory classes were referred to as consistently low, chronically high, and low but increasing (Benner, 2011). However, no research to date focused on such trajectory classes spanning mid- to late adolescence. Given that an increased diversity in psychosocial development is hypothesized to emerge as adolescents start making the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2004), such research is urgently needed.

Validation of trajectory classes

From a clinical point of view, it is important to identify predictors and outcomes of specific subgroups at risk, such as adolescents who suffer from chronically elevated levels of loneliness. However, such knowledge is limited to date. Benner (2011) indicated that adolescents in the low increasing and chronically high loneliness trajectories made less academic progress and were less likely to have passed their exit exams. Jobe-Shields et al. (2011) found that children with stable low loneliness levels showed the most positive peer functioning as compared to the group having an increasing loneliness trend. Peer functioning of the children with a decreasing loneliness trend was indistinguishable from the children with stable low loneliness levels in Grades 4 and 5. The present study aimed to contribute to this literature by analyzing the role of personality traits (as predictors) and indicators of psychosocial functioning (as outcomes) in relation to loneliness trajectories. Additionally, two demographic variables (gender and SES) were examined. All these variables have been shown to relate to loneliness, as detailed below.

First, previous studies reported mixed results when examining gender differences in levels of loneliness (e.g., Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999) and loneliness trajectories. Specifically, whereas Jobe-Shields et al. (2011) found no differences in gender distribution among the different loneliness trajectories, Benner (2011) found that girls were less likely to be in the low increasing loneliness class. These mixed results may partly be explained by the different samples of both studies. Whereas the former study sampled third through fifth graders from a university-affiliated public elementary school, the latter study sampled Latino adolescents across the first two years of high school. Next, SES has previously been related to loneliness levels, with higher levels of loneliness found in lower SES groups (Hawthorne, 2008). However, no research to date investigated its relation to the development of loneliness. Therefore, the present study explored whether adolescents in different loneliness trajectories differed in terms of gender and SES.

Second, only a handful of studies focused on the association between one's personality and loneliness. Five major traits, referred to as the Big Five, are typically distinguished (McCrae & Costa, 1987): extraversion (i.e., the tendency to engage in social behaviors and experience positive moods), agreeableness (i.e., an individual's sociability, empathy, and cooperativeness), conscientiousness (i.e., organizational and motivational aspects of a person's behavior), emotional stability (i.e., the ability to deal with negative emotions, also referred to as the opposite of neuroticism), and openness (i.e., the way an individual seeks for and deals with new information). The few studies that investigated the association with loneliness indicated that higher levels of emotional stability, extraversion, and agreeableness are associated with lower levels of loneliness (e.g., Cacioppo et al., 2006; Vanhalst et al., in press), although the association with agreeableness was not consistently replicated (e.g., Asendorpf & van Aken, 2003). No research to date, however, investigated whether the Big Five traits may lead adolescents to embark on specific loneliness trajectories.

Finally, the experience of loneliness has been shown to relate to more depressive symptoms, lower self-esteem, higher anxiety, and greater perceived stress (Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Less is known about the associations between these indicators of psychosocial functioning and loneliness trajectories. However, a previous study in childhood indicated that children with chronic feelings of loneliness reported higher levels of depression in comparison with children experiencing loneliness only temporarily (Qualter, Brown, Munn, & Rotenberg, 2010).

The present study

The present study aimed to examine the course of loneliness from mid- to late adolescence. We expected (a) a general decreasing trend in loneliness, and (b) inter-individual differences in loneliness trajectories. Specifically, we hypothesized that the majority of individuals would not experience substantial levels of loneliness through mid- and late adolescence. However, we additionally expected that certain risk groups of adolescents with chronically high or increasing levels of loneliness could be identified (Benner, 2011; Jobe-Shields et al., 2011). Finally, the present study aimed to validate the different loneliness trajectories by investigating differences between these trajectories on the basis of demographic variables and personality traits at age 15, and psychosocial functioning at age 20. We specifically hypothesized that only certain personality traits (i.e.,

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