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Personality and Individual Differences 40 (2006) 237–248

PERSONALITY AND
INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

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Why are they lonely? Perceived quality of early relationships with parents, attachment, personality predispositions and loneliness in first-year university students ☆

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Received 13 September 2004; accepted 3 May 2005

Available online 19 September 2005

Abstract

This study examined the association between perceived quality of early parental bonding and loneliness of first-year university students in relation to two central personality-related conceptualizations, attachment and Blatt's (1990) primary personality predispositions. Participants were 146 undergraduate (69 males and 77 females), who completed the Parental Bonding Instrument, an attachment styles questionnaire, the Depressive Experiences Questionnaire, and the UCLA Loneliness Scale in the middle of their first-year at university. As expected, parental care and secure attachment were negatively associated with loneliness, whereas ambivalent and avoidant attachment and self-criticism were positively correlated with loneliness. Ambivalence and self-criticism mediated in part the association between parental care and loneliness; self-criticism mediated in part the association between ambivalence and loneliness, yet both ambivalence and self-criticism uniquely predicted loneliness. Results are discussed in light of the related yet distinct contributions of attachment and personality vulnerabilities to the experience of loneliness.

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Keywords: Loneliness; Attachment; DEQ; Self-criticism; Relationships with parents; Transition to college

☆ This research was supported by a grant from the Israel Foundations Trustees to the first author.

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1. Introduction

Loneliness as a complex set of feelings and cognitions reflects the distressing and negative emotional experience emanating from the individual's perceived deficiencies in intimate and social relationships (Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999; Perlman, 1988; Rotenberg, 1999). A particularly high risk of loneliness was found during the transition to college when emerging adults are faced with the stress of living away from their family and of lacking their previous social support system. Although most freshmen reported feeling some loneliness at the beginning of the transition to college, only about 20% still felt lonely throughout their first year of college. Students who remained lonely tended to be critical of the quality of the relationships they had formed (Shaver, Furman, & Buhrmester, 1985).

Two major conceptualizations regarding personality configurations have been suggested and examined in relation to loneliness: attachment style (Shaver & Hazan, 1987) and Blatt's model of two fundamental personality and developmental dimensions, namely interpersonal relatedness and self-definition (Blatt & Blass, 1992). The two configurations are rooted in the individual's quality of relationships with parents (Blatt & Homann, 1992). Interestingly, despite apparent theoretical and empirical associations between the two conceptualizations (Reis & Grenyer, 2002; Zuroff & Fitzpatrick, 1995) their joint and unique contribution to the experience of loneliness has not yet been examined. The purpose of this research was to address this lacuna, and to examine the association between quality of early experiences with parents and these configurations, as well as the mediating role of self-criticism in the association between attachment and loneliness.

1.1. Attachment and loneliness

Attachment theory posits that people form internal working models of themselves and of others in close relationships based on their experiences with childhood caregivers (Bowlby, 1969/1982). In secure attachment these models reflect relationships with caregivers in which warmth and respect for autonomy are prevalent and include a sense of trust in the self and in caregivers, and flexible emotion regulation capacities (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). Secure people tend to form intimate and close relationships with others and within social groups, and are therefore less lonely than others. Several insecure attachment styles have been described.

Ambivalent attachment, formed in the context of unpredictable availability of the caregivers, involves a negative self-concept, anxiety, low efficacy, and distrust of others. Hyper-activating and anxious displays of emotion are used to convince others to stay close and available. The negative lenses through which these individuals interpret relationships were posited as leading to feelings of loneliness. Avoidant attachment emanates from feeling unloved and rejected by caregivers. Excessive self-reliance as a means to counteract this negative experience, deactivating emotions and their display, as well as playing down the importance of close relationships, characterizes these individuals (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). These qualities may lead to loneliness because of the low intimacy in the close relationships of these individuals. Bartholomew (1990) suggested a four-style typology in which attachment styles in adulthood are depicted as reflecting the intersection of two dimensions, a positive vs. negative model of self and a positive vs. negative model of others. Secure individuals have positive models of self and others, whereas preoccupied

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