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The Effect of Shyness and Geographical Distance from Home on Loneliness in College Freshmen

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On Loneliness in College FreshmenON LONELINESS IN COLLGE FRESHMEN

By

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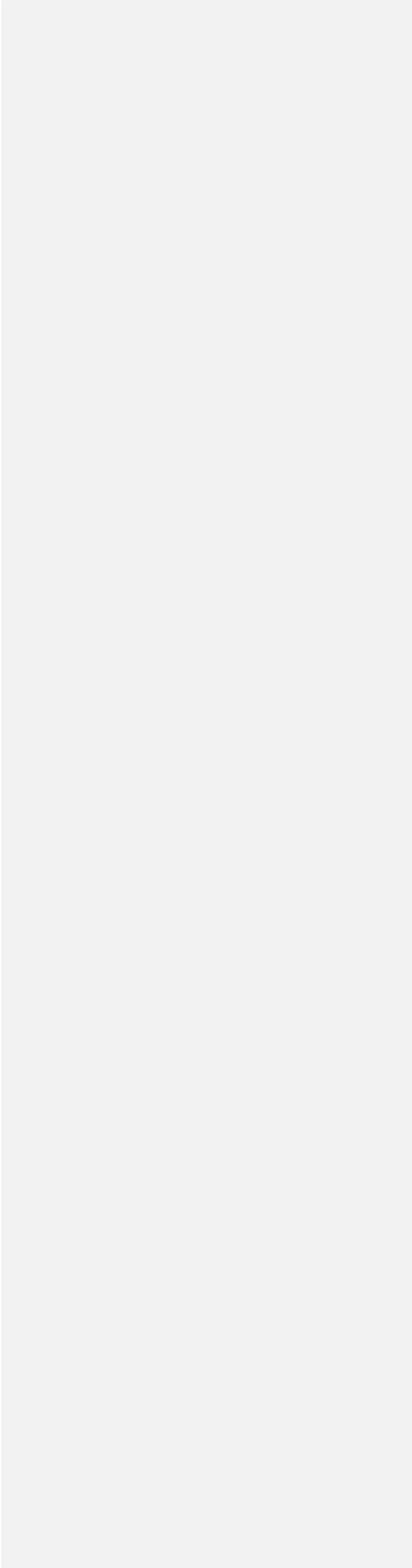
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Abstract

Entering college, the majority of freshmen experience some sort of feelings of loneliness during the beginning of the transition to a new environment. Loneliness can lead students to have a multitude of negative effects, including poorer physical health and depression. This study examined whether shyness and geographical distance from college students' permanent residence would be associated with feelings of loneliness. Participants were 93 freshmen at a large southeastern university. Results indicated that shyness was associated with the feelings of loneliness, while distance was not. Contrary to predictions, the interaction of these two variables was not a significant predictor of loneliness. Implications of the findings for enhancing freshman adjustment are discussed.

The Effect of Shyness And Geographical Distance From Home On Loneliness in College

Freshmen

The transition for young adults from the comforts of home to the new experience of college is a notable life change. A significant task that young adults must undertake when first arriving as a freshman is to create new social relationships and connections. Many variables can make this process more difficult for certain individuals. Factors such as distance and shyness affect how these peer connections are made. Studies conducted by Asendorpf (2000) and Mounts et al. (2006) demonstrated that not establishing these social connections leads to negative outcomes, most notably a state of persistent loneliness.

Feelings of loneliness occur when an individual craves social contact with others, causing the person to feel distressed and unpleasantly anxious due to the discrepancy between the relationship the individual realistically has and the one the person desires (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). When entering college, the majority of freshmen feel some sort of loneliness during the beginning of the transition to a new environment; with approximately 20% continuing to feel lonely throughout the first year (Wiseman et al., 2006). Loneliness can lead young adults to have difficulties initiating and maintaining social contact. These individuals can have decreased levels of openness about their views and preferences, troubles continuing conversations, and struggles with asking questions (Lucas et al., 2010). Loneliness has additionally been linked to poorer physical health, including decreased levels of antibodies for the Epstein-Barr Virus, decreased levels of antibody responses to influenza immunization, as well as poorer self-reported physical health (Pressman, et al., 2005)

Another stressor that can lead to feelings of loneliness is geographical distance from the student's family of origin and social support system. When the young adult moves away, it can viewed as an opportunity for growth- psychologically, mentally, and socially, or as an abrupt

absence of social support resources (Dubas & Peterson, 1996). Students with closer geographical

proximity to their parents typically have more frequent contact between family members.

However, when students and parents were asked to rank different criteria in order of importance

for choosing a school, both students and parents ranked location of the college as mid-

importance, with academics, tuition, a friendly atmosphere, and financial aid weighing heavier

than physical location (Warwick & Mansfield, 2011). Thanks to advances in technology,

students are more easily able to be in direct contact with parents and peers via phone calls, video

calls, text messaging, e-mail, and social networking sites (Gentzler et al., 2011), perhaps making

the issue of distance less problematic now.

Lonely college students tend to label themselves as shy; both factors are strongly related

constructs that may contribute to each other (Jackson, et al., 2002). The transition to college can

become more difficult if the individual is shy. Shyness can lead to fewer social interactions each

day, less frequent dating, infrequent attendance at social activities, and fewer opportunities to

interact with others. (Mounts, Valentiner, Anderson, & Boswell, 2006). Along with sociability

and parental support, shyness can produce more difficulties during the transition into college

(Holahan et al., 1994).

Feelings of loneliness can escalate and induce severe consequences. Loneliness has been

linked to depression and suicide in samples of college students and a general population sample

(Stravynski & Boyer, 2001). The second strongest association they identified with suicidal

ideation was with loneliness, preceded only by depression. College students with suicidal

ideation also reported loneliness, along with sadness and hopelessness, as their most endorsed

moods during characteristic periods of suicidal ideation (Hess et al., 2011). If the deficits

experienced by lonely college freshmen can be identified, then coping strategies and treatment

options can become more readily available to such students, potentially decreasing feelings of

depression and suicidal ideation.

The purpose of this study was to examine a possible interaction between distance from home and shyness, predicting loneliness. I hypothesized that (a) freshmen students with strong feelings of shyness will report elevated feelings of loneliness. I also predicted that (b) geographical distance from the family of origin will not, on its own, play a role in loneliness ratings, due to advances in communicative technology. Finally, (c) when a student is shy, in addition to a far distance from their permanent residence, those individuals will experience the strongest feelings of loneliness.

Methods

Participants

Participants included 93 (81.7% female; 18.3% male) undergraduate freshmen students attending a large southeastern university. The median age was 18.1 years old (range: 18-19 years old). Eighty one percent of the sample described themselves as White, 7.53% as African American, and 10.75% as Hispanic. All participants were single, expect for one who was married. The subject pool was restricted to only freshmen students since those individuals have transitioned to college most recently. Participants completed online self-report questionnaires through the Qualtrics system for course credit. All participants were required to pass a five-question survey pertaining to the informed consent. All materials and procedures were approved by the appropriate institutional review board.

Measures

Loneliness. On the UCLA Loneliness Scale Version 2, a self-administered questionnaire, individuals subjectively rate their feelings of loneliness and feelings of social isolation. Over three decades, this scale has become one of the most commonly used measurements of loneliness utilized on a variety of populations (Vassar & Crosby, 2008). Participants are given 20 items

asking how often they feel a certain way or in a certain situation, and are asked to rank their response on a 4- point Likert scale ranging from 1 "Never," to 4 "Always" (Mounts et al., 2006). Nine of the 20 items are reverse scored in order to reduce bias. Higher scores indicate greater levels of loneliness. Cronbach's alpha in one recent study was .91 and it demonstrated good test-retest reliability and construct validity with other measures of loneliness, including shyness, social anxiety, and problematic internet use (Huan, Ang, & Chye, 2014). When applied to this sample of college freshmen, Cronbach's alpha was .96.

   Shyness. The Revised Cheek and Buss Shyness Scale (RCBS) assesses interpersonal discomfort and inhibition, with higher scores indicating higher levels of shyness (Cheek & Buss, 1990). The 13-item questionnaire asks participants to choose the number that that is most characteristic of their feelings and behaviors from a 5-point scale of frequency, with 1 being "Very uncharacteristic or untrue, strongly disagree," to 5 being "Very characteristic or true, strongly agree" (Crozier, 2005). As one of the most widely used measures of shyness, it also has sound psychometric properties. An evaluation of the revised shyness scale found that it has strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha was .86), strong test-retest reliability ($r = .88$), and good discriminant and convergent validity (Hopko, Stowell, Jones, Armento, & Cheek, 2005). For this sample of college freshmen Cronbach's alpha was also .86. Means are typically converted so that higher scores on measures indicate higher levels of shyness.

   Distance. Geographic distance was measured by asking participants their permanent zip code, along with their current zip code. The distance was calculated using the number of miles it would take to drive to the participant's permanent address utilizing Google Maps.

Data Analytic Plan

   For the first hypothesis, Pearson r correlation was computed in order to test if freshmen students with strong feelings of shyness report elevated feelings of loneliness. To test if

geographical distance from the participants' home does not play a role, on its own, in ratings of loneliness, Pearson r correlation was also calculated, with no significant result anticipated. For the last hypothesis, testing the interaction between shyness and distance from home on loneliness, a multiple hierarchical linear regression was conducted. In Step 1, the scores for shyness and distance were included. In Step 2, the two-way interaction between shyness and distance was added. Shyness and distance values were centered about their means before the regression analysis, predicting loneliness scores was performed.

Results

Data Analysis

For the first hypothesis (see Table 1), shyness and loneliness scores were significantly correlated, such that the effect between the two was .645, and was highly significant ($p < .001$). For the second hypothesis, which predicted that geographical distance would not play a significant role on levels of loneliness, a nonsignificant effect was obtained ($r = -.12$, $p = .25$).

For the third hypothesis, the interaction between shyness and distance was tested. In step 1, the model containing shyness and distance predicted a significant amount of the variance in loneliness (F (2, 84) = 29.99; p < .001). There was a statistical significance of shyness predicting the loneliness scores ($\beta = .03$, p < .01). This model accounted for 41.7% of the variance in loneliness ($R^2 = 0.417$). Distance was not a significant predictor ($\beta = -0.022$, *p* = -.741~~001~~).

In step 2, the interaction of distance and shyness was added. The model remained significant F (3, 83) = 19.78; p < .001, but the model fit did not significantly improve ($\Delta R^2 = 0.00$; p = 0.827). The interaction of distance from home and shyness was not a significant predictor of loneliness ($\beta = -.02$, p = 0.827). Results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis predicting loneliness are presented in Table 2.

Discussion

In this study, it was hypothesized that shyness would correlate with feelings of loneliness, while geographical distance, alone, would not correlate to loneliness. Furthermore, the interaction of shyness and geographical distance was hypothesized to be a significant predictor of loneliness. The first two hypotheses were supported by the results, while the final hypothesis proved to be null. These findings may suggest that shy young adults who select a college or university based on a closer proximity to their social and familial support groups do not necessarily experience decreased feelings of loneliness versus if they were to choose a campus located further away from their home.

Many modern technologies allow students to be in constant contact with friends and family, regardless of distance. It is no secret that teens and young adults use social media sites; with 83% of all users ranging from 18 to 29 years old (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). Research has suggested that the Internet and social media help to alleviate some of the stress when transitioning into college (Shklovski, Kraut, & Cummings, 2008). By connecting with family and friends, the young adults can upkeep the flow of communication without face-to-face contact.

These social media sites exhibit an ideal platform in order to upkeep relationships in a quick and relatively easy manner through a variety of communication channels (Tong & Walther, 2011). Students who maintained frequent phone communication also responded positively in regards to satisfaction of the parent-child relationship, high intimacy, and support (Gentzler et al., 2011). Furthermore, text messaging has also been reported to have positive psychological, behavioral, and health outcomes. Text messaging has been used in academic settings in order to ease the social transition to college (Harley, Winn, Pemberton, & Wilcox, 2007) with positive implications.

Similar to past studies, it was found that shyness has a strong effect on loneliness. In regards to shy college students, researchers found that shy individuals spend significantly more time on Facebook that non-shy individuals (Orr et al., 2009). This can be a result of people feeling more comfortable sustaining online relationships via social media sites rather than face-to-face contact (Ebeling-Witte, Frank, & Lester, 2007). Further, it was found that shy people are less likely to use helping strategies, such as adaptive humor, which can later result in feelings of loneliness (Zhao et al., 2012). In order to decrease feelings of shyness and subsequent feelings of loneliness, clinicians should focus their attention on honing in on these shy tendencies and decreasing them, while increasing coping mechanisms and ways to feel less shy. This could, in turn, lead to a direct decrease in depression. By instilling these proactive precautions and implementing students with strategies to be more involved with other students and friends on-campus, students will hopefully be able to feel less homesick during their first year of college.

A limitation to this study is the relative homogeneity among the participants, such that the findings may not be generalizable to other populations. All of the participants came from a single university's Psychology department. The study only focused on college freshmen so the results cannot be applied to other cohorts either. Implications for further research include examining non-college populations for greater generalizations of results and testing a longitudinal study to see how students develop and feel over time in terms of loneliness. A more racially diverse sample could also yield more generalized results. One possible future direction for researchers may be to investigate freshmen students living situation (i.e., on-campus dormitory versus off-campus apartment) to examine if that is a factor that can affect feelings of shyness and loneliness. Despite these limitations, the present study provides an initial glimpse into the interplay between shyness and loneliness as young adults adjust to the transition into college and generates many directions for future research.

Even with benefits of communicative technologies, students who are shy have been found to be more likely to feel lonely. The current study does identify shyness as a factor that is associated with feelings of being lonely in college freshmen, but provides an initiative for future researchers to further investigate feelings of shyness and how to decrease such feelings. Once such characteristics of shyness are ascertained, then coping strategies and treatment options can be established.

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Table 1
Correlations

	Lonely	Shyness	Distance from Home
1. Lonely	--		
2. Shyness	0.645***	--	
3. Distance from Home	- 0.120	- 0.169	--

***$p < .001$

Table 2
Hierarchical Multiple Linear Regression
Models Predicting Loneliness

	β	S.E.	p	R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1				0.417	.417***
Shyness	0.650	0.132	0.000		
Distance	0.028	0.003	0.741		
Step 2				0.417	0.00
Shyness	0.647	0.134	0.000		
Distance	0.017	0.004	0.867		
DistancexShyness	-0.022	0.001	0.827		

***$p < .001$