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Examining the predictors of loneliness levels of university students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine to what extent loneliness levels of university students are predicted by their attachment styles, strategies of coping with stress, gender, grade levels and socio-economic levels. The study group consists of 249 students at the Faculty of Education of a private university in TRNC in the academic year 2008-2009. The data of the research are obtained through the use of Relationship Scale Questionnaire (RSQ), UCLA Loneliness Scale and The Coping Strategy Scale (CSS). In the analysis of the data, Multiple Regression Analysis is used. The results of the study indicate significant relationships among almost all the variables.

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Keywords: Loneliness level, attachment styles, family relations, coping with stress, university students;

1. Main text

As the modern man is alienated from the society, he begins to suffer from loneliness, feel guilty and sometimes lose his psychological health by being unable to tackle with the difficulties confronted in life (Köknel, 1998). Individuals feel alone when they need the support of a friendly and sincere group in which they feel secure, and they can't find one or if they can't establish good social relationships with the others because they lack the maturity to do so (Santrock, 1993). According to Hall, loneliness is a significant indicator of the inability to meet the need of forming friendships or special relations (2000). When adolescents are alone, they suffer more from loneliness than adults; men and women suffer from loneliness under different circumstances (Duck, 1986). Adolescents who have had a secure attachment with their families are more successful in their relationship with their friends, have higher self-esteem and feel more competent in their social lives (Sümer and Güngör, 1999). According to Santrock (1993), the inability to establish close interpersonal relations leads to loneliness. Bowlby states that each individual has an attachment style, and s/he is born with this ability (1969). This ability enables individuals to be close to their mothers and to have self-confidence (Bowlby, 1982; Ünal, 2005). Researchers have found out that individuals with an insecure attachment style have a tendency to exhibit more depressive symptoms and experience less confidence, communication and satisfaction than the ones with secure attachment styles (Powers, Pietromonaco, Gunlicks and Sayer, 2006; Lele, 2008; Wellisch, 2010). Secure attachment is closely related to the parental behavior of love and

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care to be duly, consistent, empathic and to meet the child's needs (Weinfield, Sroufe, England and Carlston, 1999). Gezer, in his study to examine the relationship between the attachment styles of adolescents and their family environment, has come to the conclusion that the adolescents in low functioning families develop fearful, preoccupied and dismissing attachment styles whereas the adolescents in high functioning families develop secure attachment styles (2001). A research carried out by Sroufe et al. (1999) concludes that children with insecure attachment styles establish a more dependent relationship with their teachers and are more nervous and bashful in their social environment (Celebi, N. 2010). The feeling of low attachment gives individuals the feeling of loneliness when they confront negative events and difficulties in life (Yılmaz, M., & Orhan, F. 2010). It is important for university students to use effective coping strategies to be able to develop a healthy personality. Attachment styles play a significant role in building up strong relationships. Therefore, there is a special need for researches on effective coping strategies, attachment styles and loneliness levels of university students. The purpose of this study is to examine to what extent loneliness levels of university students are predicted by their attachment styles, coping strategies, gender, grade levels and socio-economic levels.

2. Method

2.1. Study Group

The study group consists of 249 students at the Faculty of Education of a private university in TRNC in the academic year 2008-2009. The universe of the study covers all the university students in Cyprus. The sampling of the study consists of 142 female (57%) and 107 male (43%) randomly chosen university students from various departments of Faculty of Education.

2.2. Instruments:

The data of the research are obtained by means of Relationship Scale Questionnaire (RSQ), UCLA Loneliness Scale and The Coping Strategy Scale (CSS). *Relationship Scale Questionnaire (RSQ)*: This questionnaire is made up of 17 items to measure the dimensions of attachment defined by Bartholomew (1990). Reverse items are 5, 7, and 17. While measuring the dimensions of attachment, both the original and reverse forms of item 5 are used. Average of items 3, 7, 8, 10 and 17 gives the score for secure attachment; items 1, 4, 9, and 14 for fearful attachment; items 5 (reversed), 6, 11, 15 for preoccupied attachment; and items 2, 5 (original), 12, 13, and 16 for dismissing attachment. *UCLA Loneliness Scale*: The original scale is the Loneliness Scale developed by Russel, Peplau and Ferguson at the University of Los Angeles in 1978. Its adaptation into Turkish was made by Demir in 1989. The validity of the scale is based on Beck Depression Inventory and Criterion Validity. Validity coefficient of the scale is .82. The reliability of the scale was done by test re-test method and the reliability coefficient is .94. *The Coping Strategy Scale (CSS)*: This scale is a self-assessment inventory developed by Amirkhan (1990) and adapted into Turkish by Aysan (1994). Aysan also tested the validity and reliability of the inventory. It is made up of three sub-scales: Problem Solving, Social Support Seeking and Avoidance. The high score of subscale points indicates the increase in the defined quality. The reliability coefficient of the scale is .92.

2.3. Analysis of Data

The data were analyzed on SPSS.12; Multiple Regression Analysis was carried out in order to find out the predictors that determine the loneliness levels of the students. Significance level is accepted as .05 in the study.

3. Figures

As it is seen in Table 1, there is a highly significant relationship between the sub-dimensions of coping with stress, “problem solving”, “social support seeking”, and “avoidance”; and attachment styles, “secure attachment”, “fearful attachment”, “preoccupied attachment”, and “dismissing attachment”. In addition, gender, grade and socio-economic level of the university students have a high significant relationship with their loneliness scores ($R = .448$, $R^2 = .201$, $p < .01$). The above mentioned ten variables account for 20% of the total variance. According to standardized regression coefficients (B), the order of the respective importance of predictor variables on loneliness is socio-economic level, secure attachment, preoccupied attachment, avoidance, dismissing attachment, grade, gender, fearful attachment, social support seeking and problem-solving. When the results of t-test related to the significance of regression coefficients are examined, it is noticed that the variables of problem-solving, social support seeking, avoidance and secure attachment are significant predictors of loneliness. According to the results of regression analysis, the regression equation is (Mathematical model) Loneliness = $49.298 + .371$ Problem Solving + $.421$ Social support Seeking - $.691$ Avoidance - $.649$ Secure Attachment - $.066$ Fearful Attachment + $.432$ Preoccupied Attachment - $.225$ Dismissing Attachment + 1.294 Gender + $.076$ Grade + $.308$ Socio -Economic Level.

Table 1. The variables that predict the loneliness levels according to multiple regression analysis

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Correlations		
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Zero-order	Partial	Part
(Constant)	49.298	5.817		8.475	.000			
Problem Solving	.371	.135	.227	2.750	.006	.243	.176	.160
Social-Support Seeking	.421	.133	.257	3.157	.002	.249	.201	.184
Avoidance	-.691	.144	-.331	-4.809	.000	-.101	-.299	-.280
Secure	-.649	.224	-.173	-2.900	.004	-.146	-.186	-.169
Fearful	-.066	.258	-.017	-.255	.799	-.006	-.017	-.015
Preoccupied	.432	.260	.099	1.664	.097	.110	.108	.097
Dismissing	-.225	.211	-.069	-1.069	.286	-.074	-.069	-.062
Gender	1.294	1.051	.074	1.231	.219	.079	.080	.072
Grade	.076	.469	.010	.162	.871	.002	.011	.009
Sel	.308	.815	.022	.378	.706	.059	.025	.022
R = .448 R ² = .201 F _(10,236) = 5.939 p = .000 Dependent Variable: Loneliness								

4. Results and Discussion

When the results are considered in general, it is found out in distribution diagrams that take partial relations of predictor variables and loneliness levels as a base that there is a positive linear relationship between “problem solving” and “social support seeking” as sub-dimensions of loneliness and coping with stress. It is also discovered that there a negative linear relationship between the sub-dimensions of “avoidance” and “secure attachment”. Socio-economic level is ascertained to be an important predictor of loneliness. The fact that the participants are away from their families and are educated at a private university may be the reason of this finding. In the research by Le Roux and Connors (2001), it is found out that there is no significant effect of socio-economic level on loneliness. Our research findings differ from theirs in this respect. When gender is considered, it is seen as a predictor of loneliness. In similar studies, there are similar results that loneliness is more frequent in male students and they are more disadvantaged than female students at expressing themselves and solving problems in social relations (Le Roux and Connors, 2001). In the studies about attachment styles, it is noticed that there is a positive relationship between insecure attachment styles and major depression, social anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorders, chronic pain, and suicidal behaviour at a psychopathological dimension (Eng et al., 2001; Simpson et al., 1996; Myhr et al., 2004; Johnson and Flake, 2007). Insecure attachment styles are seen as determiners of having psychological problems at later periods in life whereas secure attachment styles are associated with healthy processes (Nakash-Eisikovits et al., 2002). All the other studies prove that insecure attachment is a predictor that decreases self-confidence and increases depressive symptoms and psychopathologic evidence. Children who are brought up in a social and psychological environment full of difficulties can perceive interpersonal relations as stressful and helpless (Denham, 2007). Inability of students to develop secure attachment and deprivation from social support can increase their feeling of loneliness. Especially the students who are away from their family environment may suffer from separation anxiety at a significant level if they are deprived of social support and cannot establish close relationships. It is essential to provide the students with individual counselling, group activities to enhance relationships among friends and activities to strengthen social bonds. The students must be equipped with strategies to cope with stress. In addition, it is strongly believed that similar studies should be done on students’ loneliness levels, attachment styles and coping strategies related to various other variables.

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