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The Role of Attachment Styles and Resilience on Loneliness

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship attachment styles and resilience have with loneliness in students. In this correlational study conducted in 2011, 200 students (132 women and 66 men) were selected through multistage cluster sampling. Data was collected through questionnaires concerning attachment styles, resilience, and loneliness. Data was analyzed using Pearson correlation coefficients, regression analyses, and independent t-tests. Regression analyses showed that ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles are positive predictors of emotional loneliness; the ambivalent style of attachment is the strongest predictor of emotional loneliness. Resilience is a significant negative predictor of loneliness due to communication with family, friends, and emotional symptoms associated with feelings of loneliness. Moreover, t-test results showed a significant difference between men and women in that male students reported more family loneliness and emotional symptoms associated with feelings of loneliness than females. The findings of this study highlight the fact that providing the conditions and context necessary for secure attachments and increased resilience can be effective in reducing loneliness in students.

Keywords: Attachment, Loneliness, Family, Friends, Students

INTRODUCTION

Interaction with peers is a powerful and universal need of human beings. It is thought that a lack of face-to-face contact and separation from others may lead not only to social distance in relationships, but also to loneliness, especially in young people [1]. Loneliness is commonly experienced by all human beings in the course of their lives, regardless of gender, age, ability, race, religion, or socio-economic status. This feeling may occur in cases of loss of a close relationship, entering university, traveling to a strange country, or entering a new school or work environment [2]. Loneliness is the cognitive consciousness of weakness in personal and social relationships that results in isolation and feelings of sadness, emptiness, or disappointment and regret [3]. It is an unpleasant and distressing mental state experienced with the failure of social relations [4]. Most definitions provided for loneliness describe it as unpleasant feelings and negative emotions from which most people run away. However, some researchers have considered it a provocation of some negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, and not being loved rather than merely a negative emotion. Statistics show that one in four people suffer from loneliness [5]. Therefore, it is important to identify and assess the effects of loneliness.

Loneliness can lead to disease, and disease can lead to feelings of loneliness. When the immune system does not function properly, patients are prone to mental illness. Affected patients face a sense of emptiness and sadness associated with depression and their physical and mental health [2].

Lonely people show little compatibility and progress, have less social and rational competence, are less often selected as a friend, have fewer honest behaviors, and act passively. There is a correlation between loneliness and social and psychological problems like alcoholism, suicide, depression, anxiety, addiction, low self-esteem, negative attribution, delinquency, and failure in school [6].

Loneliness has two forms, emotional and social, is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, and has different levels of severity, conditions, and causes. Emotional loneliness is caused by a lack of close emotional attachments with other people, while social loneliness is caused by the lack of a social network in which one is part of a friendly group that shares common interests and activities [7]. The distinction between emotional and social loneliness implies that loneliness manifests in different ways, depending on the circumstances under which the individual's needs are not satisfied. For example, a teenager may be satisfied with connections with his peers but feel loneliness in communicating with parents and family. The opposite is also true. As a result, loneliness cannot be reduced by replacing one form of communication with another.

Researchers believe that the style and history of an individual's attachment affect loneliness [8]. Attachment is the lasting emotional bond between two people, where one of the parties tries to maintain proximity to the attachment figure and takes action to ensure that the relationship continues [8]. Attachment behavior activates when a person feels fear or sadness or contracts a disease. It makes that person search for or stay close to a familiar person [9]. The attachment theory emphasizes that early childhood relationships form attachment styles and influence individual's views about themselves, others, and the organization of interpersonal relationships [10]. Attachment styles can be defined as patterns of thinking, feeling, and personal behavior in close relationships with a caregiver and other intimate partners [11]. The three described types include secure, avoidant, and ambivalent attachment developed in childhood [12] which may continue into adulthood [13]. People with the secure attachment style are comfortable in intimate relationships, tend to be dependent on others for support, have a positive image of themselves, and have positive expectations from others. People with the avoidant attachment style consider themselves emotionally cold and suspicious; they find it difficult to rely on others and feel worried when others become too intimate with them. People with ambivalent attachment style consider themselves as not understood by others, lack confidence, and feel worried about the fact that others abandon them or do not really like them [14]. A study of the relationship between attachment styles and loneliness confirmed the relationship between these two variables and found that those with the secure attachment style feel less loneliness than people with the insecure attachment style [15]. Another study revealed a negative relationship between social and emotional loneliness and secure attachment and a positive relationship between social and emotional loneliness and insecure attachment [16].

In addition to attachment styles, resilience can also be considered an effective factor in loneliness [17]. Research has shown that high levels of resilience help individuals use sentiments and positive emotions to leave undesirable experiences behind and return to the desired state [18].

Resilience is positive adaptation and successful coping in exposure to stressful events that enables a person to return to his initial base level [19]. Resilience means hardiness in facing stress and the ability to recover a normal situation and survive and strive under horrible conditions. Four factors are identified as determinants of resilience [20]: 1. Children's traits such as an easygoing temperament and individual characteristics; 2. Different skills and esteem processes and social competence; 3. Family cohesion and good parents-children communication; and 4. Social support [21]. Research has shown that resilient children have adaptable and easy traits that invoke a positive response in adults. They are sociable and talkative children, popular among their classmates, have good communication and problem solving skills, use flexible strategies when facing adverse conditions, and, if necessary, ask for help from teachers and peers. Resilient teens and adults have features like an internal locus of control, a more positive self-concept, social maturity, compassion, a sense of responsibility, and independence [22]. Studies have also shown that older adolescents compared to younger ones not only use more diverse coping strategies for reducing stress, but are also more likely to use cognitive coping strategies such as re-assessment because of their cognitive development [23].

Resilience plays a very important mediating role in the prevention or development of many psychiatric disorders [24]. It can also guarantee and promote mental health [25] and may increase in the presence of protective factors in the person or environment [26], which include skills such as communication, leadership, problem solving, resource management, the ability to eliminate obstacles to success, and the ability to plan. Several studies have identified some consequences of resilience such as mental health, a reduction in emotional problems, and satisfaction with life [27]. One emotional problem to which resilience can contribute is loneliness [17].

Loneliness, if neglected, causes physical and mental problems in people. Considering that youths are more prone to loneliness because of a mixture of personality traits, identity crisis, adulthood, and different social conditions, assessing the factors that appear to play a role in the loneliness of young people seems useful. Thus, this study investigated the role of attachment styles and resilience in students' feelings of loneliness.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Students of Shahid Beheshti University in the academic year 2011-2012 were recruited for this non-experimental correlation study. The sample consisted of 200 students selected through the multistage random sampling method. Participants were asked to complete a loneliness questionnaire, an adult attachment style questionnaire [28], and a resilience scale questionnaire [29]. It should be noted that prior to completing the questionnaires, participants were informed of the objectives of and methods used in this research. The adult attachment questionnaire measured secure and insecure attachment styles and consisted of two parts. In the first part (AAQ1), participants responded to three sections describing the project on a seven-point scale. In the second part (AAQ2), the described were re-assessed, but this time respondents expressed their similarity only by checking one of them. The second part of the questionnaire was based on the scale of the issue and used the results of the respondents to classify attachment styles. Cronbach's alpha and test-retest reliability coefficients were reported as 0.79 and 0.73, respectively. The validity of the adult attachment style questionnaire was satisfying and significant [30]. In Iran, its validity was reported with a retest of 0.92.

Construction and validation of the loneliness questionnaire was defined by Dehshiri. This scale had a total of 38 questions and included three loneliness factors resulting from family relations (16 items), communication with friends (11 items), and emotional symptoms (10 items). The loneliness scale and its three subscales had good internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was 0.91; the subscale of loneliness resulting from family relations was 0.80; the subscale of loneliness resulting from communication with friends was 0.88; and the emotional symptoms subscale was 0.79. A retest ability of 0.84 was calculated for 37 students with an interval of two weeks for the total scale; the subscale of loneliness resulting from family relations was 0.83; the subscale of loneliness resulting from communication with friends was 0.84; and the emotional symptoms subscale was 0.76. These factors alone represent the stability of the scores from the loneliness scale over time [31].

Kaner-Davidson's resilience scale [29] is a 25-item instrument that measures resilience structure on a Likert scale from zero to four. The least resilience score of participants was zero and the maximum was 100. Results of the preliminary study regarding the psychometric properties of this scale confirmed its reliability and validity [29]. The internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and convergent and divergent validity of the scale were previously reported [32]. Data from the research was analyzed using SPSS software version 15 and Pearson correlation, regression, and independent t-tests.

RESULTS

Of all students participating in the study, 66.7% (n=132) were female and 33.3% (n=66) were male; 37.1% stayed in a dormitory and 62% lived outside the dormitory; 78.6% were single and 21.5% were married (Table 1).

The comparison of loneliness between male and female students showed there were more signs of loneliness resulting from family relations and emotional loneliness in men than in women, while no significant difference was observed between the two groups (Table 2).

Table 1. Demographics of study participants

Variable	Group	Frequency (%)
Gender	Female	132 (66)
	Male	66 (33)
	Not defined	2 (1)
Status of living	Dormitory	72 (36)
	Outside dormitory	121 (60.5)
	Not defined	7 (3.5)
Marital status	Married	42 (13.5)
	Single	154 (84.5)
	Not defined	4 (2)

Table 2. Results of independent t-test comparing the subjects regarding loneliness

Variables	Females	Males	t	P
	Mean± SD	Mean± SD		
Loneliness resulting from family relations	29.67±9.18	30.1±9.29	0.35	0.72
Loneliness resulting from communication with friends	35.87±10.16	40.90±9.59	3.27	0.001
Signs of emotional symptoms	25.19±7.8	27.69±6.28	2.21	0.028

Assessing the correlation between the variables of the study showed that, among attachment styles, the secure attachment style had a significant negative relationship with loneliness due to communication with friends (P<0.05), and the ambivalent attachment style had a significant positive correlation with the loneliness due to communication with friends and family (P<0.05). Ambivalent (P<0.01) and avoidance attachment styles (P<0.05) had positive and significant relationships with signs of emotional loneliness, and resilience had a negative and significant relationship with all three types of loneliness (Table 3).

Table 3. Correlation between attachment styles and resilience with loneliness

Variables	Loneliness resulting from communication with friends	Loneliness resulting from family relations	Signs of emotional symptoms
Avoidant attachment style	0.11	0.09	0.22*
Ambivalent attachment style	0.18*	0.18*	0.25**
Secure attachment style	-0.18*	-0.02	-0.04
Resilience	-0.22**	-0.22**	-0.19*

N=200 *P<0/05 **P<0/01

Table 4. Summary of regression analysis of attachment styles and resilience of loneliness

Independent variable	Dependent variable	B	SE	β	t	P	DF	F	P Value	R2
Family	Avoidant	0.21	0.544	0.034	0.38	0.7	4	2.56	0.04	0.08
	Ambivalent	0.77	0.514	0.137	1.51	0.13				
	Secure	0.49	0.561	0.079	0.87	0.38				
	Resilience	-0.14	0.061	-0.22	-2.4	0.01				
Friends	Avoidant	0.58	0.46	0.11	1.25	0.21	4	3.47	0.01	0.1
	Ambivalent	0.72	0.42	0.15	1.69	0.09				
	Secure	-0.37	0.47	-0.07	-0.78	0.43				
	Resilience	-0.11	0.05	-0.2	-2.25	0.02				
Emotional signs of loneliness	Avoidant	0.92	0.33	0.23	2.8	0.006	4	6.88	0.0001	0.16
	Ambivalent	0.88	0.3	0.24	2.86	0.005				
	Secure	-0.12	0.34	-0.03	-0.36	0.76				
	Resilience	-0.08	0.03	-0.19	-2.27	0.025				

The results showed that attachment styles and resilience generally explain 8% of the variables' variance associated with loneliness due to communication with family. It was observed that the only variable of resilience, which is a significant predictor of loneliness, was due to relationship with the family; the amount of beta was -0.22 and t=-2.4 was significant in the Alpha of p<0.01. The findings also indicated that attachment styles and resilience generally explain 10% of the variables' variance associated with loneliness due to communication with friends. Accordingly, the only significant predictor of loneliness was communication with friends; the amount of beta was -0.2 and t=-2.25 was significant in the Alpha level of 0.02. The results also showed that attachment styles and resilience explain generally 16% of the variables' variance of signs of emotional loneliness. Accordingly, an avoidant attachment style, ambivalence, and resilience were significant predictors of symptoms of emotional loneliness. The ambivalent

attachment style had the most significant role in predicting the variance of the dependent variable of emotional symptoms of loneliness; it was significant in Beta of 0.24 and $t=2.86$ in the Alpha of $p<0.005$. Avoidant attachment style was significant in beta of 0.23 and $t=2.8$ at alpha level of $p<0.006$, and resiliency was significant in beta of -0.19 and $t=-2.27$ at alpha level of $p<0.025$.

DISCUSSION

The results of the correlation coefficient showed that, among attachment styles, the secure attachment style had a significant negative relationship with loneliness and the ambivalent attachment style had a significant positive relationship with loneliness and friends and family. Ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles and emotional symptoms of loneliness also had a significant positive relationship. These results are consistent with studies that have shown that attachment styles are associated with feelings of loneliness [15]. A possible explanation for this finding can be the differences in attachment styles. Secure people develop mental models of themselves as if they are competent individuals, worthy of attracting sentiments, attention, and concern from others; in their opinion, others are accessible, well-intentioned, and reliable people. Secure people communicate easily with others and rarely worry about rejection [33].

People with anxious-ambivalent attachment style consider themselves as people who are not understood by others and clearly lack confidence. They consider the important people in their lives as unreliable and tend not to have intimate relationships. They feel a sense of concern that others have left them or do not love them. These people associate their important relationships with low levels of satisfaction, commitment, trust, and dependence. People with avoidant attachment style consider themselves emotionally distant, aloof, and skeptical; they think of others as unreliable or too eager for a long-term commitment in their relationships. They find it difficult to trust and rely on others and feel concerned when others become too intimate with them [14]. Like ambivalent individuals, these people associate important relationships with low levels of satisfaction, mutual dependency, and trust. With regard to the fact that secure people have higher satisfaction, commitment, trust and interdependence in their important relationships than insecure people [14], it can be argued that secure individuals report less loneliness and fewer emotional symptoms associated with it when they are more satisfied with themselves, others, and their relationships. The results also showed that resilience had a significant negative relationship with loneliness due to communication with family and friends and the emotional symptoms associated with loneliness. To justify this finding, consistent with research in the field of social resilience [35], it must be stated that resilience is not only a resistance to damage or threatening situations; it is the active and productive participation of the individual. In addition, resilience is a kind of self-recovery with positive emotional and cognitive outcomes [34]. Features such as the ability to extend compassion to others, a general attractiveness for others, social activities, good relationships with peers, support seeking, having social character, and healthy expectations are discussed as resilience factors [35]. Failures and social problems are the main features of loneliness [36]. Thus, one can expect less loneliness with higher levels of resilience.

The results of regression analyses indicated that avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles were significant predictors for signs of emotional loneliness, and the ambivalent attachment style was the strongest predictor of emotional loneliness. This result was in line with studies that have shown that attachment styles predict loneliness [6, 37].

These findings can be explained in that people develop different attachment styles based on how they perceive themselves and others. These perceptions, called the internal working model, are effective in the judgment of people around the world [38]. The internal working model in ambivalent people is a negative view of themselves and a positive view of others; they depend on the approval of others for a sense of self-worth, which would be associated with loneliness in them. The inner working model in avoidant people, however, is a positive view of themselves and a negative view of others; they value independence and separation from others more than intimate and close relationships [8].

Regression analyses showed that resilience was a significant predictor of loneliness due to relationships with family and friends and a sign of emotional loneliness. These results are consistent with studies that have shown that resilient individuals feel less loneliness [17]. A possible explanation for this finding could be that people who have high resilience have features such as greater autonomy, independence, empathy, and good relationships with peers and are also able to have broader social support systems and family relationships to help them have better

compatibility [39]. Based on these features, it can be argued that higher resilience is associated with less loneliness and fewer emotional symptoms.

Independent t-test results showed a statistically significant difference between women and men in loneliness of family and symptoms of emotional loneliness, as men reported more family loneliness and symptoms of emotional loneliness than women. This finding is consistent with those of other studies [40]. Possible explanations can be different communication styles between men and women; the social network orientation is emotional-social in women and task-oriented in men who communicate to obtain and maintain their social status. Moreover, women are more social than men, are more likely to disclose to their close friends, and have more intimate social networks [41].

CONCLUSION

Among the theoretical implications of the findings of this study is the provision of new ideas and hypotheses about the determinants of loneliness. These determinants (attachment styles and resilience) will enrich the theoretical models of loneliness. Regarding practical consequences, the results can be an empirical basis for developing education and health in mother-child relationships, increased resilience, intervention programs, emotion management and treatment programs based on disorders caused by loneliness in students and improvement in educating the children of this nation.

This study had some limitations. Given that the sample group consisted of students, generalizing the results to all sectors should be done with caution; therefore, more research is required for a decisive position on the relationship attachment styles and resilience have with loneliness in Iranian society. This study only examined the role of attachment styles and resilience in predicting loneliness. Therefore, the results are only important to identifying the impact of attachment styles on loneliness. Researching other variables that affect the structure of loneliness would be quite useful.

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