

## ADOLESCENT LONELINESS ASSESSMENT

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of the present work was to develop a loneliness scale for adolescents in order to assess their perceptions of the quality of their relationships with parents and peers. The scale was administered to 1,233 Argentine secondary school students, aged 13–16 years. Factor analyses (principal axes, oblimin solution) were conducted. Four factors were obtained, which accounted for 43.13% of the variance: Peer Rejection, Family Deficits and Parent Rejection, Personal Inadequacy, and Significant Separation. The internal consistency assessed through Cronbach's alpha was satisfactory. We believe that this proposal, which aims at evaluating the different processes that cause and are caused by a feeling of loneliness, allows for an integral approach to the issue.

Feelings of loneliness are here considered as deficiencies in systems of interpersonal interaction. Weiss (1973) made a distinction between loneliness due to emotional isolation and loneliness due to social isolation. Emotional isolation appears in the absence of close emotional attachment whereas social isolation appears in the absence of an engaging social network. Relationship with parents and peers constitute two different social contexts in which loneliness develops. A study of loneliness in children and adolescents therefore distinguishes between loneliness due to relationship with parents (parent-related loneliness) and loneliness due to relationship with peers (peer-related loneliness) (Terrell-Deutsch, 1999).

Processes contributing to the onset of vulnerability to loneliness develop throughout late childhood and early adolescence in sensitive children. A pattern made up of social anxiety, lack of dominance, and social isolation seems to elicit peer rejection, negative self-perception, and an internalization of problems that includes loneliness (Rubin & Mills, 1991). There also is evidence that internalization of problems and maladaptive behavior such as withdrawal and submission in children and young adolescents are caused by a negative shame-inducing

This study was supported by a grant from the National Council of Scientific and Technological Research of Argentina (CONICET). The authors gratefully acknowledge Matilde Bogani and Máximo Eckell for their assistance with test administration and evaluation.

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attribution style. This is probably due to a peculiar tendency to respond to negative social experiences by internalizing a long-standing negative self-image (Cash, 1995). When the child blames his own incompetence for any negative social experiences and the young adolescent attributes them either to his or her incompetence or lack of social prestige and nonacceptance by others, the end result is social withdrawal, depression, and lasting vulnerability to problem-internalization (Olweus, 1993).

Among such negative social experiences, we may include sudden and forced changes brought about by external causes, such as moving to a new home or to a different school. Most authors agree that adolescence is the most vulnerable stage in connection with these changes. On one hand, it entails separation from the previous peer group and, on the other, it requires joining a new, already existent group whose members usually enjoy picking on nonmembers. Exposure to the values and attitudes of a new peer group coupled with the pressure to adapt to it usually results in rejection of parental advice and an increase in tensions within the family (Gander & Gardiner, 1981).

We think that an instrument evaluating adolescent loneliness should include not only items related to the sources of feelings of loneliness, but items related to the current loneliness feelings in connection with the most important persons in the social network: peers and parents.

The aim of the present work is to develop an adolescent loneliness scale that includes the feeling of being alone among parents and peers and the corresponding attributions that will help determine the degree of loneliness in relation to various sources.

## METHOD

### *Scale Development*

Our scale items were based on instruments constructed by other authors. Rokach and Brock (1995) developed a scale that included some items related to inadequate social support systems, social alienation, troubled relationships, loss, crisis, developmental deficits, personal shortcomings, and other items that provide information on significant changes adolescents may have undergone. The authors worked with marginal adolescents and based their loneliness theory upon five factors related to the origins of feelings of loneliness: Personal Inadequacies, Developmental Deficits, Unfulfilling Intimate Relationships, Relocation/Significant Separation, and Social Marginality (Rokach & Brock, 1995). Rokach and Brock not only stress family deficit, but per-

sonal inadequacies and feelings of loneliness stemming from separation brought about by relocation and other such changes.

Marcoen focuses more specifically on nonmarginal children and adolescents, underscoring the quality of interpersonal relationships especially with family and peers at the time of the interview.

Marcoen, Goossens, and Caes (1987) define aversion to aloneness and affinity for aloneness: "One group of persons that has negative views of their being alone, tend to attribute their aloneness to other people's inadequacies, and try to cope with their being alone through seeking contact with others. Another type of people exhibit a positive evaluation of being alone, attribute their aloneness to their own inclinations and habits, and try to rely on their own resources in coping with being alone" (p. 563).

In other works, however, it was found that affinity for aloneness, in Marcoen and Goossens' operational description, is associated with children of Latin descent under pathological control by the mother, which gives it a negative character. Therefore, it would not be a kind of loneliness that fosters thought and serenity; on the contrary, it would mean wanting to be alone due to lack of trust in and rejection of others (Richaud de Minzi, 2002, 2003).

Probably, affinity for aloneness corresponds to emotional isolation, whereas aversion to aloneness corresponds to social isolation as defined by Weiss (1973) (Richaud de Minzi, 2002).

Since the concept of affinity for aloneness is unclear for Argentine children, it was not included in the scale.

In the present study, 58 items covering feelings of loneliness in connection with parents and peers as well as items covering feelings of loneliness related to personal inadequacy, family deficits, and significant person separation caused by relocation or change of schools, were included. The scale was administered to 1,233 adolescents aged 13–16 years (511 males and 722 females) attending secondary schools in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

### *Analysis*

The discriminating power of each item was examined. Items that received the same response from over 75% of the subjects were considered nondiscriminating. Items were analyzed to assess their factorial validity through principal axis method and oblimin solution. The measure of sampling adequacy—Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and anti-image correlation were calculated.

Cronbach's alpha was also calculated to determine the reliability of the scales with regard to internal consistency.

## RESULTS

Two of the items were deemed nondiscriminating (being maltreated by my family and feeling rejected by my family). However, they were kept because they indicate radical situations among normal adolescents. It was presumed correctly, as it turned out, that there would be an asymmetrical distribution of "never" response, but they might prove useful when evaluating problematic adolescents.

Adolescents within the age group studied (13–16) do not interpret their incipient relationships with the opposite sex as "intimate relationships" but, rather, as signs of social prestige (Eder & Kiney, 1995). There were also a large number of missing responses (No answer) for items related to problems within intimate relationships—basically the sexual aspects. We kept the items associated with these matters (e.g., Item 13: Being unable to share my most intimate thoughts with my partner) since studies of later adolescence (17 years of age or older) witness a clear notion of intimate relationships.

### *Factor Validity*

After the items were administered, results were factor analyzed with the principal axes method, oblimin solution: four interpretable factors were obtained, which accounted for 37.80% of the variance (Table 1). Correlation between factors ranged from .26 to .39

A new factor analysis was performed by choosing only eight items in each factor. These were the items that show the highest correlation with the corresponding factor. At the same time, the chosen items had to show high weight in only one factor; i.e., they must not exhibit factorial complexity. Items 5, 7, 8, 11, 15, 17, 18, 21, 22, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29, 32, 35, 38, 39, 40, 43, 46, 47, 49, 51, 53, and 54 were eliminated. The correlation matrix had already been studied, resulting in satisfactory values ( $KMO = .91$  and Test of Sphericity = 8984.75,  $p = .000$ ).

Four factors accounted for 43.13% of the variance: Peer Rejection (4, 20, 31, 33, 45, 48, 50, 55), Family Deficits and Parents Rejection (includes items belonging to three theoretical dimensions but all referred to parents: 44, 36, 23—lack of attention; 42, 34, 16—nonsharing; 37, 41—family break-up), Personal Inadequacy (1, 2, 6, 9, 10, 13, 14, 26), Social Inability when faced with Significant Separation (3, 12, 19, 30, 52, 56, 57, 58). Correlation between oblique factors was not high (ranging from .16 to .35), which indicates a satisfactory independence among them.

Once the new scales had been established, the internal consistency of each was analyzed; Cronbach's alphas ranged from .70 to .87.

Table 1

Factor Analysis of Argentine Loneliness Scale for Adolescents  
(Oblimin Solution)

Items	F1	F2	F3	F4
35. I feel abandoned by my friends	.77	.40	.32	.33
20. I feel my friends do not love me	.73	.30	.35	.27
48. I think my classmates criticize me and leave me out	.73	.29	.33	.27
50. Others pretend not to see me	.70	.39	.37	.30
33. I feel excluded by my classmates	.69	.33	.34	.26
46. I feel lonely	.69	.41	.48	.31
45. Other children mock me	.66	.28	.37	.21
25. Often I feel that I do not "fit in"	.65	.42	.51	.19
47. Nobody listens to me when I say something	.65	.49	.39	.29
55. I doubt anybody loves me	.64	.37	.43	.28
54. I feel lonesome	.62	.38	.39	.41
31. When I suggest doing something (a game, a sport activity), nobody likes to join in	.57	.27	.33	.30
4. I feel sad because I do not have friends	.55	.20	.20	.41
15. I frequently feel unimportant	.53	.38	.58	.22
53. I feel nobody cares about me	.51	.48	.25	.33
17. I feel unable to make friends because of my shyness	.47	.22	.49	.31
42. Feelings are not openly shared in my family	.28	.73	.36	.25
23. I feel my parents were not emotionally supportive of me	.23	.72	.24	.21
37. I feel that the relationship with my parents has been interrupted	.20	.72	.22	.18
44. My parents do not listen to me when I say something	.39	.71	.24	.17
36. My parents never had any spare time for me	.27	.71	.27	.19
34. I feel there is a lack of trust between the members of my family	.24	.69	.26	.17
41. I feel rejected by my family	.34	.68	.15	.12
16. My parents are emotionally distant	.19	.66	.20	.15
5. My home life is unhappy	.27	.65	.28	.19
38. I do not have an emotionally close-knit family	.23	.65	.15	.27
51. I feel excluded at my own home	.38	.64	.21	.18
24. I am unfairly punished by my family	.22	.63	.17	.13
8. I am maltreated by my family	.24	.54	.12	.13
39. My parents are often absent from home	.17	.46	.22	.19
43. My sister and brother fight with me	.24	.33	.17	.00

Table 1 continues

Table 1 (continued)

Items	F1	F2	F3	F4
49. Teachers are not interested in me	.23	.32	.26	.26
21. I feel that I lack personal courage	.43	.30	.64	.19
11. I feel I have nothing to offer to another person	.38	.32	.58	.15
32. I feel intimidated by people more sociable than me	.46	.31	.56	.22
14. I do not know how to behave in a social setting	.33	.17	.55	.21
27. I feel very inadequate	.37	.31	.54	.28
26. I am not able to express my feelings	.31	.19	.53	.23
10. I believe that I will not be able to achieve my goals	.24	.29	.52	.17
1. I am afraid to be rejected when I get close to someone	.35	.15	.51	.19
13. I cannot share the most intimate thoughts with my partner	.00	.12	.51	.00
6. I blame myself when things go wrong	.18	.25	.49	.20
2. I feel intimidated by persons of the opposite sex	.19	.00	.45	.19
40. I fear dates	.38	.25	.43	.21
28. I am disappointed by my relationship with my partner	.14	.18	.43	.17
9. I am not considered a special person by my partner	.19	.18	.42	.11
7. I feel I have distinctly different interests from most people	.21	.26	.39	.34
29. I like to be alone	.27	.24	.32	.20
22. I feel bored	.24	.29	.32	.15
19. When we moved, I was separated from my friends for a long period of time	.11	.18	.33	.64
52. I do not have a close friend to whom I can tell everything	.31	.23	.00	.63
58. I have no friends to have fun with	.43	.27	.13	.59
56. There is nobody I can have a good chat with	.44	.32	.13	.57
12. When we moved, it was hard to adapt to new places	.21	.21	.44	.57
3. When moving or changing schools, I experienced difficulties making new friends	.35	.25	.39	.56
30. When moving, I felt homesick for my previous place or school	.00	.15	.31	.48
18. I don't trust anyone	.35	.30	.21	.42
57. I wish I had more friends	.23	.10	.13	.36
Explained variance (%)	24.75	6.37	3.67	3.01

This study attempted to obtain an instrument that accurately assesses loneliness among adolescents. It is based on a cognitive theoretical model, which holds that feelings of loneliness develop within a specific way of perceiving interaction systems. The specific way referred to develops according to the relationship established with parents, particularly attachment. Cognitive theory suggests that loneliness results from dissatisfaction with one's perceived social relationships. This approach studies loneliness from an "internal" perspective, focusing on how the lonely individual perceives and evaluates his/her social life, and not from the point of view of an external observer (Peplau, Miceli, & Morash, 1982, p. 137).

The scale can assess how adolescents rate the quality of their relationship with parents and peers, since these are the most relevant social links and attachment figures (Marcoen & Brumage, 1985). It also allows for an evaluation of the sources of feelings of loneliness such as perception of personal inadequacy and the feeling of being unwillingly alone, which reflects emotional isolation in the absence of a close attachment, as well as the feeling of being rejected by peers that reflects social isolation in the absence of a social network.

As far as Family Deficits and Parents Rejection are concerned, evaluation is crucial since problems in parent-child relationships promote vulnerability to loneliness, resulting in insecurity and very strict standards for relationships. When parents offer their children poor models of interaction and do not help them develop social skills (44, 36, 23 (lack of attention), 42, 34, 16 (nonsharing), 37, 41 (family break-up) it results in poor ability to approach others and enter into dyadic relationships (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1995). It seems that these kinds of unsatisfactory relationships result in deep feelings of personal inadequacy in regard to social skills: this is shown in items 1, 2, 9, 13, 14, and a feeling of loneliness, expressed in items 6, 10, and 26.

On the other hand, overcommitted, intrusive, and overprotective parents, who do not allow their children to develop their own initiative and control their own peer interactions, will raise children who lack social self-confidence, independence, and initiative. These characteristics of parent/child relationships shape other aspects of personal inadequacy, expressed in items 6, 13, 14, 26 (feeling incompetent), 1, 2, 6, 10 (lack of self-confidence).

Throughout middle childhood, constant exposure of sensitive children to ridicule or humiliation, unfair treatment, and exclusion from their peer group, results in social anxiety, avoidance, and a self-perception of social incompetence. This is even more obvious if they are unable to defend themselves and have no allies willing to defend them

(Parkhurst & Asher, 1992). These feelings will lead them to consider themselves rejected by peers (items 4, 20, 31, 48, 50, 33, 45, 55).

In cases where there is, in fact, an external event such as relocation or change of school, resulting in separation from old peer groups and joining new ones, the problems are compounded. These processes are expressed in items 18, 52, 56, 58 of the factor Social Inability when faced with Significant Separation. This difficulty in adapting is based on lack of confidence not because of rejection but, feeling lonesome for no established reason.

In sum, we posit a method for evaluating loneliness in adolescents with a comprehensive approach that takes into account the various aspects of this complex feeling.

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