



A model proposal on the relationships between loneliness, insecure attachment, and inferiority feelings



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ABSTRACT

Introduced by Bowlby and Adler respectively, the concepts of insecure attachment and inferiority feelings are based on the hypothesis that the relationships individuals experience during the early years of their lives influence both the form and quality of relationships they establish in adulthood. This study investigated to what extent the independent variables of insecure attachment and inferiority feelings can predict loneliness, and using a hypothetical model, it was analyzed whether inferiority feelings have the role of mediator between insecure attachment and loneliness. The results showed that insecure attachment and inferiority feelings can predict loneliness significantly and that inferiority feelings have partial mediation effect between insecure attachment and loneliness.

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1. Introduction

The feeling of loneliness is emphasized due to both its existential aspects and the tangible results it leads to in an individual's life. In the existentialist view, loneliness is a part of human nature and is unavoidable (Fischer, McElwain & DuBoise, 2000). This philosophical perspective regarding loneliness has been accepted within the counseling literature too (May & Yalom, 2005; Murdock, 2013). Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean not fighting this feeling. As loneliness is felt at different levels by each individual (Perlman, Peplau & Peplau, 1984) the consequences of the adverse nature of this feeling could include even suicide (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006; Killeen, 1998). Hence, it is a preliminary symptom for depression and phobias (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006; Meltzer, Bebbington, Dennis, Jenkins, McManus & Brugha, 2013), schizophrenia (Kudo, Mori & Gomibuchi, 2002) and it is a risk factor for psychotic disorders (Olin & Mednick, 1996).

Being lonely does not only mean “being isolated” since it is partly based on individual perception (Perlman, Peplau & Peplau, 1984). Loneliness refers to an inner process especially. Therefore, it is defined as the subjective experience of having inadequate social contacts (Ayalon, 2016). It is not always true that people with a small social network are lonely because introverts or detached individuals may prefer being by themselves and do not feel lonely. The subjective satisfaction levels of relationships are a much better predictor of loneliness than frequency of contact (Fischer & Phillips, 1982).

Loneliness and social interaction are two inversely proportional variables (Brough, 1994). In this aspect, loneliness can be defined as

restrictions in communicating and interacting with others and staying apart from others despite the fact that humans are social beings (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010; Perlman, Peplau & Peplau, 1984). Loneliness may also mean keeping oneself away from others, preferably (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). It is often a byproduct of one's self-perception (Özben, 2013) stemming from poor relationships with others even when social relationships have been established (Perlman, Peplau, & Peplau, 1984). Some lonely individuals see the social world as a threatening place, expect negative social interactions, and remember negative social information (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010). Consequently, loneliness, be it a part of human nature or a psychological difficulty, is regarded as a condition to be tackled because of the negative results it produces in an individual's life (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010; Killeen, 1998).

Scholars have offered explanations with an examination of the underlying dynamics of loneliness and the relevant psychological variables, and several strategies have been suggested to cope with loneliness based on these explanations (Cacioppo & Hawkey, 2009; Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Bowlby's attachment theory and Adler's individual psychology have special significance in terms of either directly or indirectly explaining an individual's experiences of loneliness.

1.1. Attachment theory and loneliness

According to Bowlby (1973, 1984), attachment style is determined by the form of relationships that a child builds with immediate family members who take care of him/her, and this internalized relationship form, then defines the close relationships that the child will establish with others during adulthood. Internalized relationship types emerge as either secure or insecure attachment during adulthood. Secure

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attachment indicates a sense of worthiness or lovability, plus an expectation that other people are generally accepting and responsive (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). People with secure attachment experiences are sociable and self-confident and do not refrain from building close relationships (Çalışır, 2009; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Since these individuals deem themselves and other people worth loving and having relationships, they can establish intimate relationships (Akbağ & İmamoğlu, 2010) and they open themselves more to other people (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991). However, people with insecure attachment generally tend to protect themselves by avoiding close relationships, social settings, and contact with others (Bartholomew, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Shaver & Brennan, 1992). Although people with insecure attachment have some special attachment figures, they are attached to these figures under threatening conditions (Mikulincer, Gillath & Shaver, 2002).

Insecure attachment should be examined in two aspects as attachment-anxiety and attachment-avoidance (Fraley, Waller & Brennan, 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014). While people with attachment-avoidance generally show less satisfaction, intimacy, self-disclosure, supportive behavior, and positive emotions during social interactions, people with attachment-anxiety show negative emotional experiences and more frequent feelings of rejection (Kafestios & Nezelek, 2002). Whereas attachment-anxiety surfaces as constant efforts to please others in order to be accepted and not to be abandoned by others, those with attachment avoidance avoid relationships (Selçuk, Günaydın, Sümer, & Uysal, 2005).

Despite the aforementioned differences, both insecure attachment styles still share some common features. In fact, individuals with attachment anxiety or avoidance, or both, suffer from attachment insecurities, self-related worries, and distrust of others' goodwill and responsiveness. In addition, people with either of these insecure attachment styles suffer from interpersonal conflicts, and have difficulties finding functional solutions for these conflicts (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014).

According to Mikulincer & Shaver (2014) interpersonal problems and low-quality, unstable relationships of insecurely attached people can easily result in subjective feelings of loneliness. So, the experience of loneliness can be understood through an attachment framework (Thomas, 2016). Theoretically, loneliness in adulthood is seen as the emotional-cognitive-perceptual reflection of insecure attachment (Weiss, 1987). Therefore, attachment styles are vital factors for individuals to fulfill their social functions completely (Man & Hamid, 1998). Consequently insecure attachment can be taken as a predictor of loneliness for an individual, whereas secure attachment bears a definitive role in having healthy relationships with others (Margalit, 2010).

Studies show that attachment types have a statistically significant impact on loneliness. For example, it was found that as the severity of loneliness decreases, so the level of secure attachment increases, and loneliness becomes more severe as the level of insecure attachment increases (DiTommaso, Brannen-McNulty, Ross, & Burgess, 2003). Researchers have mostly placed importance on social skills in their endeavors to explain the relationship between insecure attachment and loneliness. Poor social skills/competencies resulting from insecure attachment during the developmental process (Mallinckrodt, 2000) have been shown to be, at the same time, among the typical symptoms of loneliness (Jones, Hobbs, & Hockenbury, 1982; Lodder, Goossens, Scholte, Engels, & Verhagen, 2016). Lonely individuals often do not possess the social skills/competencies necessary to begin and develop close relationships (Jones, Hobbs, & Hockenbury, 1982), or they assume that they are deficient in these skills (Lodder et al., 2016). Accordingly, it has been reported that people with high level of secure attachment have better levels of social skills (DiTommaso et al., 2003).

1.2. Individual psychology and loneliness

Loneliness is also considerably significant within individual psychology. Adler (1996) stated that humans are social beings at birth and the

degree of human health is bound to how social a person is. Again, according to Adler, being excessively spoiled or neglected during the early years of development causes individuals to experience inferiority feelings and, thus to have problems in their social relationships (Adler, 1998). Defective attitudes of caregivers during the early years lead individuals to develop inferiority feelings, and these feelings are sustained even during adulthood (Adler, 1927, 1996; Dreikurs, 1977).

Theoretically, inferiority feelings are related to low levels of social interest demonstrated by an individual (Adler, 1927; Ansbacher, 1992; Brough, 1994), and therefore, may be taken as a major indicator of loneliness. Indeed, inferiority feelings decrease as social interest grows (Akdoğan & Ceyhan, 2014). In this sense, low social interest is also a reflection of an individual's inferiority feelings (Adler, 1927). Individuals with high levels of inferiority feelings try to overcome this by surpassing others, and they engage in useless superiority efforts (Adler, 1998). In this regard, people with high levels of inferiority feelings regard those around them as threats, and prefer to stay away from them (Adler, 1996).

1.3. Current study

The theoretical explanations and determinations show that insecure attachment and inferiority feelings are the primary indicators of loneliness. The fact that individuals with insecure attachment do not trust themselves or others (Bartholomew, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) can be taken as a sign that individuals who experience this feeling extensively also nurture inferiority feelings for themselves. Conversely, because intensive inferiority feelings are accompanied by distrust of others (Adler, 1996), it impedes the building of secure attachments and safe relationships. From this standpoint, loneliness can be regarded as an outcome affected by insecure attachment and inferiority feelings.

Although both insecure attachment and inferiority feelings play a crucial role in an individual's loneliness, there are also differences between the two. Firstly, any level of insecure attachment can make difficult individuals' life (Bowlby, 1984) while a certain level of inferiority feeling can become a motivating factor (Adler, 1996). Furthermore, insecure attachment has close ties with anxiety emanating from fear of rejection (Kafestios & Nezelek, 2002) and with efforts to please others in order to cope with this anxiety (Selçuk, Günaydın, Sümer, & Uysal, 2005), but inferiority feelings are primarily related with an inferiority complex and superiority efforts are developed to overcome this complex (Adler, 1927). Thus, individuals with insecure attachment can end up lonely as a result of their negative self-perceptions (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) whereas, those with inferiority feelings can become lonely because of their efforts to surpass others (Adler, 1998). Similarly, people with insecure attachment can still establish relationships with others to some extent despite their anxiety and avoidance feelings (Mikulincer, Gillath & Shaver, 2002), but individuals with inferiority feelings can totally avoid social settings (Dreikurs, 1977).

In this study, a hypothetical model was proposed. Based on the model, (a) whether insecure attachment and inferiority feelings can predict loneliness as separate variables, and (b) whether inferiority feelings have a role as a mediator between insecure attachment and loneliness, were investigated.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The study was conducted on students in the education, literature and science faculties of a university in Turkey, during the 2015–2016 academic year. The research was completed with 422 participants; 283 female, 139 male. In addition, 101 of participants were freshmen, 76 sophomores, 184 junior, and 61 senior students. The mean age was 20.98 (SD = 1.66). They were selected via simple random sampling

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