



The loneliness of the zero-sum game loser. The balance of social exchange and belief in a zero-sum game as predictors of loneliness



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between loneliness and the two variables that refer to the perception of social relations as exchange – the balance of social exchange (BSE) and the belief in a zero-sum game (BZSG), taking into consideration self-esteem as a control variable. A total of 298 Polish university students completed instruments measuring BZSG, BSE, self-esteem, and loneliness. It was revealed that BZSG was positively associated with loneliness even when the level of self-esteem was controlled for, but the results of multiple regression analyses showed that after adding all of the predictors into the equation the only significant main effects were associated with BSE and self-esteem. However, in the final model, the interaction effect was also significant, which means that BSE moderated the effect of BZSG on loneliness. Specifically, the positive relationship between BZSG and loneliness was significant only among participants with a low level of BSE. These results are discussed in the broader context of research on cognitive predictors of loneliness.

1. Introduction

Building meaningful social relations is one of the basic human needs (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). People who do not succeed in this important area of life may experience loneliness, understood as a subjectively felt discomfort associated with unsatisfactory interpersonal relations (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980). Among the essential factors in the development and persistence of loneliness are maladaptive patterns of social perception and cognition (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Spithoven, Bijttebier, & Goossens, 2017). Identifying cognitive predictors of loneliness seems to be even more important in the light of recent studies which have revealed that changing maladaptive patterns of social cognition is one of the most effective means of reducing perceived social isolation (Masi, Chen, Hawkley, & Cacioppo, 2011). Among the cognitive variables, low self-esteem is one of the best-established predictors of loneliness. In fact, many studies have demonstrated a strong correlation between the two variables (Mahon, Yarcheski, Yarcheski, Cannella, & Hanks, 2006). Moreover, as is shown in longitudinal studies, changes in self-esteem lead to changes in the experience of loneliness, rather than the other way around (Vanhalst, Luyckx, Scholte, Engels, & Goossens, 2013). On the other hand, studies on the consequences of cognitive evaluations of relationships have provided evidence that perceptions of relationships as less supportive, less accepting and less satisfying are also linked with feelings of

loneliness (Bernardon, Babb, Hakim-Larson, & Gragg, 2011; van Roekel, Ha, Scholte, Engels, & Verhagen, 2016). However, much less attention has been given to date to the identification of predictors of loneliness among generalized beliefs about the social world.

Yet there is data suggesting that negativistic beliefs regarding human nature and the rules prevailing in the world may be a factor blocking the development of close interpersonal relations and, as a consequence, contribute to the experience of loneliness (Neto, 2006). Such beliefs assume the mutual exclusivity of human interests, egoism, dishonesty and the primacy of rivalry over cooperation (cf. Duckitt & Fisher, 2003). Research to date has revealed negative associations between loneliness and interpersonal trust (Givertz, Woszidlo, Segrin, & Knutson, 2013; Qualter, Quinton, Wagner, & Brown, 2009; Rotenberg et al., 2010) and a positive one with social cynicism (Neto, 2006). A negative correlation has also been noted between revenge forms of entitlement and satisfaction with close relationships (Żemajtł-Piotrowska, Piotrowski, & Baran, 2014).

The study presented in this paper is yet another attempt to identify the cognitive factors contributing to loneliness, this time by bringing together self-esteem - a well-established predictor of loneliness, and the two variables related to the social exchange framework: a perceived balance of social exchange and belief that social exchange is a zero-sum game.

Abbreviations: BSE, balance of social exchange; BZSG, belief in a zero-sum game

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1.1. Relationships as social exchange

According to the social exchange theory, every kind of social encounter is a manifestation of exchange between at least two persons, which is more or less costly from the point of view of the parties involved (Homans, 1961). From the individual's perspective, humans are creature driven by self-interest, making decisions that seek personal advantage, looking for the transaction of exchange not only to maximize personal gains but also to prevent others from obtaining higher profits (Homans, 1958). Benefits or losses are therefore the key criteria of decision-making and behaviour towards others, relating to helping, establishing and maintaining intimate relationships (Nair, 2002; Rusbult, 1983). The satisfaction with the balance is not only a derivative of the profit itself (reward minus cost). An important expectation accompanying such an exchange is that of fairness, understood in the categories of equal distribution of costs and benefits among the participants in a social relationship (Messick & Sentis, 1983). Theoretically, a favourable balance activates the motivation of positive reciprocity, whereas an unfavourable balance triggers a negative “eye-for-an-eye” exchange (cf. Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Eisenberger, Lynch, Aselage, & Rohdieck, 2004). In accordance with such theoretical assumptions, the balance of social exchange (BSE) comprises global evaluations of experiences to date related to the exchange of goods and services with others. Interpreted in this way, it is the variable which is definitely closer to perceived social support than, for example, to interpersonal trust. As noted by Różycka-Tran, Boski, and Wojciszke (2015), BSE is significantly different from interpersonal trust, which is “more universal because it refers to others in general (including strangers to be met in the future), whereas interpersonal balance is more specific because it refers to individuals personally met in the past and the effects of interacting with them” (p. 529).

Previous research indicates that a positive evaluation of the balance of social exchange is negatively associated with loneliness. It should be noted, however, that in the studies to date social exchanges have for the most part been interpreted as various forms of social support, and that the samples mostly consisted of older adults (Liu & Rook, 2013; Rook, 2001). One of the few studies conducted among young adults revealed that loneliness was predicted by a high frequency of negative and low frequency of positive exchanges (Fiori & Consedine, 2013). Research on friendship has also yielded data confirming that loneliness may be associated with various unbalanced forms of social exchange, i.e. not only with the feeling of being under-benefitted but also with being over-benefitted in relation to one's own input into social relationships (cf. Buunk & Prins, 1998; Russell, Cutrona, McRae, & Gomez, 2012).

1.2. The belief in a zero-sum game and its regulatory functions

A peculiar situation occurs in the process of social exchange when the actions of at least two people are aimed at achieving the same reward. The degree to which one individual is successful is then equal to the degree to which the other is stripped of a chance of winning. This is when the social relations between the two parties become a zero-sum game. It is hard to estimate what proportion of human interactions is structured in this way, but research suggests that people differ greatly in their ways of perceiving social situations from this perspective (Wojciszke, 2010). This would mean that the zero-sum game is both an objective phenomenon and a generalized belief, which may distort the perception of social situations in which a draw or a win to both parties are possible. In recent years a Polish team of researchers (Wojciszke et al.), referring to earlier concepts of Leung and Bond (2004), have presented the belief in a zero-sum game (BZSG) as one of the social axioms, i.e. basic universal and generalized beliefs that people endorse and use to understand the world and guide their behaviours in different social situations (Różycka-Tran et al., 2015; Wojciszke, Baryła, & Różycka, 2009). Research conducted in 37 countries has confirmed the pan-cultural character of BZSG (Różycka-Tran et al., 2015). BZSG

involves the certainty that resources are limited, which in turn generates a secondary assumption that social relations are by nature antagonistic and the success of one individual is only possible at the expense of the failure of another (Różycka-Tran et al., 2015). This way of seeing the social world favours the habit of identifying people as potential enemies or rivals and its regulatory functions are especially strongly manifested in people who feel they are losers in the process of social exchange (Różycka, 2012). Researchers have linked BZSG to anxiety, sadness, a sense of injustice, negative reciprocity norm hostility, and revenge motivation (Borawski, 2017; Różycka, 2012; Różycka & Wojciszke, 2010). It encourages conflict and causes people to avoid cooperation while also correlating negatively with life satisfaction, optimism, self-esteem and interpersonal trust (Różycka, 2012; Wojciszke et al., 2009).

BZSG has not yet been investigated as a predictor of loneliness. However, social cynicism, another conceptually similar axiom identified by Leung and Bond, has been found to correlate positively with loneliness (Neto, 2006). Both axioms represent a negative vision of the social world as a fundamental requirement for survival and it can be assumed that, as with social cynicism, BZSG also affects the perceived quality of social interactions, particularly since BZSG, when compared to social cynicism, refers to the nature of relations between people rather than human nature per se (Różycka, 2012).

1.3. The current study

The main purpose of the current study was to examine the roles of BSE and BZSG in predicting loneliness. As suggested by previous studies (e.g., Fiori & Consedine, 2013), a negative relationship with loneliness has been hypothesized in the case of BSE. A positive relationship with loneliness was postulated in the case of BZSG, based on the results of research investigating the similar construct of social cynicism (Neto, 2006). It was also hypothesized that BSE and BZSG would incrementally predict loneliness even when the level of self-esteem is controlled for. Taking into account self-esteem as control variable is particularly important because in the previous studies both BZSG and BSE correlated moderately or highly with self-esteem, so any possible relationships between these and loneliness may be theoretically attributed to the influence of self-esteem. Additional rationale for this step provided Buunk and Prins (1998) when considering self-esteem as control variable in research on link between reciprocity in friendship and loneliness. As they noted, the relationships between the perception of social exchange and loneliness may be explained by personality features, such as self-esteem. Because lonely individuals often have low self-esteem, it might be potentially the key mechanism that makes it difficult for them to maintain reciprocal relationships. To control at least in part for this possibility, a measure of self-esteem was included also in the current study.

Furthermore, it was predicted that BSE would moderate the association between BZSG and loneliness. The previous research shows that BZSG displays its regulatory functions particularly in people who feel like losers in the social exchange process (Wojciszke, 2010; Wojciszke et al., 2009). BZSG is not only linked with the tendency to maximize one's own interest but also with the attribution of the same motivation to others (Różycka, 2012). This, in turn, implies a conviction that one's personal failures are the result of the purposeful actions of others. It may, therefore, be presumed that BZSG in people who view themselves as losers in the social exchange intensifies their fear of being exploited, which again inhibits their ability to build intimate and satisfying social relationships. Thus, it was anticipated that positive relationship between BZSG and loneliness would be stronger for individuals with a low level of BSE.

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