



# Direct and indirect effects of relationship status through unmet need to belong and fear of being single on young adults' romantic loneliness

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## ABSTRACT

Prior research has extensively documented the association between marital and relationship status and romantic loneliness; however, the mechanism explaining this association has not yet been fully explored. Therefore, the current study was intended to investigate the link between relationship status and romantic loneliness among young adults by testing a model in which unmet need to belong and fear of being single would operate as mediators in serial in this link. In the present study, data were collected from 419 Polish adults aged 20 to 35 ( $M = 24.78$ ,  $SD = 3.48$ ). The tested serial mediator model explained 64.36% of the total variance in romantic loneliness. Results showed that single status had a direct negative effect on romantic loneliness, and that mediation through unmet need to belong, mediation in serial through unmet need to belong influencing fear of being single, and mediation through fear of being single were partial. Furthermore, the indirect effect of relationship status on romantic loneliness through unmet need to belong had a greater impact than the indirect effect of relationship status through unmet need to belong and fear of being single operating in serial.

## 1. Introduction

Unfailing interest in loneliness is undoubtedly connected with the notion that loneliness is (1) a phenomenon universal and fundamental to being a human, (2) a subjective experience affected by personal and situational factors, and (3) a complex and multifaceted experience that is related to pain and distress, and one that is individualistic (Rokach, 2012). Sources of loneliness may vary depending on a particular period of life (Qualter et al., 2015). For example, the lack of a romantic partner and a romantic relationship was found to be an important source of loneliness in young adulthood (e.g. Qualter et al., 2015; Adamczyk, 2016), since for young adults establishment of a close tie with a partner/spouse represents one of the important goals at this stage of life (e.g. Rydz, 2011).

Sources of loneliness may also be related to changes in belonging needs during an individual's life (Qualter et al., 2015). Considering that the need to belong reflects the importance people attach to close relationships with friends, partners, and family (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2013), it is not surprising that unmet, hampered satisfaction of the need to belong was found to be associated with loneliness (e.g., Mellor, Stokes, Firth, Hayashi, & Cummins, 2008; Pillow, Malone, & Hale, 2015; Reichl, Schneider, & Spinath, 2013; van Roekel, Ha, Scholte, Engels, & Verhagen, 2016). In a different study, however, Leary et al. (2013) did not observe a significant correlation between the need to belong and loneliness, but they determined such a correlation

between the need to belong and social isolation. At the same time, apart from observing a weak positive association between need to belong and loneliness, in the study cited earlier Mellor et al. (2008) also determined a strong positive correlation between loneliness and unmet need to belong understood as the difference score between need to belong and satisfaction with personal relationships. On the basis of their results, Mellor et al. (2008) suggested that rather than the need to belong per se, it is the unmet need to belong which is more influential in determining subjective well-being.

### 1.1. The present study

Although “a lack of certain types of relationships within a person's social network may result in feelings of loneliness” (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007, p. 2), there is still the question of how relationship status as an objective state of having or not having a romantic partner is related to romantic loneliness. Therefore, the current study, which was inspired by Mellor et al.'s (2008) study, intended to search for the mechanism linking relationship status and romantic loneliness by making reference to the recently established constructs of *satisfaction with relationship status* (Lehmann et al., 2015) and *fear of being single* (Spielmann et al., 2013). At the same time, the present study attempted to overcome some limitations of Mellor et al.'s (2008) study. To be precise, in order to determine the unmet need to belong, Mellor et al. (2008) used in their study the construct of satisfaction with personal

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relationships. The authors assessed the unmet need to belong by calculating the difference score between the results obtained from the Need to Belong Scale and the results obtained in response to one item from the Personal Wellbeing Index (International Wellbeing Group, 2006) measuring satisfaction with personal relationships. Considering that the current study focused on romantic loneliness, when determining the unmet need to belong it became important to refer to satisfaction concerning romantic relationships rather than personal relationships. In turn, including in the planned analyses satisfaction with romantic relationships would make it impossible to take into account single individuals since they are not able to report any kind of satisfaction with a romantic relationship. Therefore, in order to determine the level of unmet need to belong, the current study made use of a recently established construct introduced by Lehmann et al. (2015) termed *satisfaction with relationship status* or, more briefly, *status satisfaction*. This new construct is understood as satisfaction with an individual's current relationship status (i.e. having or not having a partner), and this type of satisfaction can be reported both by single and partnered individuals, allowing for comparisons between these two groups (Lehmann et al., 2015). In addition, satisfaction with relationship status was found to be a more important and exploratory factor in predicting life satisfaction and psychological distress in comparison to marital status per se (Lehmann et al., 2015; Adamczyk, 2017). Based on the theoretical importance of satisfaction with relationship status, this construct was used in the current study to determine the unmet need to belong (i.e., unsatisfied belongingness need) by calculating the difference score between results obtained from the Need to Belong Scale and the results obtained in response to one item from *Satisfaction with Relationship Status Scale* (ReSta; Lehmann et al., 2015).

Furthermore, in their study, Mellor et al. (2008) focused on comparisons in the domain of unmet need to belong and need to belong in regard to living arrangements. These comparisons showed that people who lived alone and people who lived with others did not differ in regard to their unmet need to belong, while people who lived alone reported a lower level of the need to belong (Mellor et al., 2008). The focus on living arrangements, however, is not related to relationship status, and it is clear that an individual may be single and live with other people (e.g. family or friends), also an individual may have a partner but may not cohabit with him or her and run a single household. Therefore, although living arrangement is treated as an indicator of social isolation (e.g. de Jong Gierveld, van Tilburg, & Dykstra, 2006), it is difficult to treat it as an indicator of relationship status.

Finally, the current study also drew upon a relatively recently discovered links between the need to belong and fear of being single, as well as between loneliness and fear of being single (Spielmann et al., 2013). Fear of being single is a new construct defined as “entailing concern, anxiety, or distress regarding the current or prospective experience of being without a romantic partner” (Spielmann et al., 2013, p. 1049). Spielmann et al. (2013) explored the implications of fear of being single in important relationship domains. For example, the authors found moderate positive correlation between fear of being single and loneliness as measured by UCLA Loneliness Scale, and strong correlation between fear of being single and need to belong as measured by the Need to Belong Scale (Spielmann et al., 2013). Regarding the positive association between fear of being and loneliness observed in Spielmann et al.'s (2013) study, and their suggestion that individuals who fear being single may prioritize relationship status above relationship quality, it is plausible to assume that fear of being single can also be positively related to romantic loneliness.

To sum up, the current investigation, inspired by studies by Mellor et al. (2008) and Spielmann et al. (2013), was aimed at investigating the serial mediator model explaining the associations between relationship status and young adults' romantic loneliness (see Fig. 1). Considering that the aim of the study was not to test the postulated theoretical model but rather to examine the mediating role of unmet need to belong and fear of being single in the link between relationship

status and romantic loneliness, in the current study the mediation analysis was performed with the use of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013).

As Fig. 1 shows, relationship status as an objective state of having or not having a romantic partner was assumed to be related to different levels of the unmet need to belong as a result of the difference between the need to belong and the degree of satisfaction of this need expressed in a certain level of satisfaction with the current relationship status. Furthermore, since people differ in terms of the strength of their desire for acceptance and belonging (Leary et al., 2013), it is reasonable to expect that the experienced unmet need to belong may also be related to the varied level of concern about the current possibilities of satisfying this need as well as anticipating possibilities of satisfying this need in the future. In turn, this concern would express itself in the form of fear of being single related to the current or anticipated situation of not having a romantic partner and not being in a relationship, which would allow an individual to satisfy his or her need to belong. Based on these assumptions, in the model adopted in the current study (see Fig. 1), the direct effect of relationship status on romantic loneliness, three specific indirect effects of relationship status on romantic loneliness, and the total indirect effect were postulated to exist. These postulated effects are reflected in the following hypotheses formulated on the basis of prior research:

**Hypothesis 1.** Relationship status will have a direct effect on romantic loneliness in such a way that single status will be associated with higher romantic loneliness.

**Hypothesis 2.** Relationship status will have an indirect effect on romantic loneliness through unmet need to belong in such a way that single status will be associated with higher unmet need to belong, which in turn will be associated with higher romantic loneliness.

**Hypothesis 3.** Relationship status will have an indirect effect on romantic loneliness through unmet need to belong and fear of being single in serial in such a way that single status will be associated with higher unmet need to belong influencing fear of being single whose higher level will be associated with higher romantic loneliness.

**Hypothesis 4.** Relationship status will have an indirect effect on romantic loneliness through fear of being single in such a way that single status will be associated with higher fear of being single, which, in turn, will be associated with higher romantic loneliness.

**Hypothesis 5.** Relationship status will have an indirect effect on romantic loneliness through unmet need to belong, fear of being single, and through unmet need to belong influencing fear of being single, which, in turn, influences romantic loneliness.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 419 Polish adults aged 20–35 ( $M = 24.78$ ,  $SD = 3.48$ ), of whom 298 were females (71.10%) and 121 males (28.90%). The vast majority of participants (94.99%) indicated to be heterosexual, whereas 21 participants (5.01%) indicated to be non-heterosexual. With respect to education attainment, 282 respondents were students (67.30%), 27 respondents had completed secondary education (6.40%), 27 respondents had a bachelor's degree (6.40%), and 83 respondents held a higher education degree (9.80%). In regard to living arrangements, 380 participants (90.70%) indicated that they lived in a two- or more person household (i.e. they lived with family, friends or a partner), and only 39 participants (9.30%) indicated that they lived in a single household. With respect to relationship status, 232 participants (55.40%) had a romantic partner, whereas 187 participants (44.60%) were single. In turn, the distribution of marital status was as follows: 21 respondents were married (5.01%), 4 were separated

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