



Linking social connectedness to loneliness: The mediating role of subjective happiness



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships among social connectedness, loneliness, and subjective happiness. Three hundred and twenty-five [178 (55%) female, 147 (45%) male, $M_{age} = 20.96 \pm 1.85$] Turkish university students completed the Turkish version of the Social Connectedness Scale, Subjective Happiness Scale, and UCLA Loneliness Scale. Structural equation modeling revealed that subjective happiness partially mediated the relationship between social connectedness and loneliness. Moreover, bootstrapping procedure demonstrated that the indirect effect of social competence on loneliness through subjective happiness was significant. The implications of these findings for research and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Human beings are inherently social and they need to belong, feel connected with others, establish and maintain social relationships (Rettie, 2003). As Dalai Lama stated “We human beings are social beings. We come into the world as the result of others’ actions. We survive here in dependence on others. Whether we like it or not, there is hardly a moment of our lives when we do not benefit from others’ activities. For this reason, it is hardly surprising that most of our happiness arises in the context of our relationships with others (Cited in Ferrazi & Raz, 2005, p. 291)”.

Having social interactions are substantial for both human physical and psychological health. Kohut’s (1984) self-theory also emphasizes the human need for belongingness. According to Kohut, development of self takes place along three axes, one of which is the *alter ego-connectedness axis* referring to the development of a person’s ability to communicate feelings, form intimate relationships like one’s family, friends, peers, and become part of larger groups (Banai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005). Riedl, Köbler, Goswami, and Krcmar (2013) claimed that individuals can evaluate their social relationships depending upon the extent to which they feel socially connected.

Social connectedness, which has been characterized as one of the main motivating principles behind social behavior, is usually considered as a predictor of a successful life and it has been associated with many social and health-related benefits (Riedl, et al., 2013; Smith & Mackie, 2000). Lee and Robbins (1998) described social connectedness as a type of relational schema and explained this construct as “the subjective

awareness of being in close relation with the social world” (p. 338). Van Bel, Smolders, IJsselsteijn and de Kort (2009) argued that individuals’ subjective experience of belonging and relatedness are the center concepts that lie under social connectedness and they defined social connectedness as a short-term experience of relatedness and belonging, depending on quantitative and qualitative social judgments, and relationship salience. According to Smithson (2011) social connectedness comprises the way that individuals connect with other people and how they see themselves with respect to these associations.

Experiencing a sense of social connectedness helps people to feel that they have a part of their world and may have an effect on one’s emotions, cognitions, and perceptions. A person with high levels of connectedness can easily participate in social activities. On the other hand, without a sense of social connectedness individuals may have problems in managing their needs and may feel frustrated in the social world (Duru & Poyrazli, 2011). Previous research on social connectedness indicated that social connectedness provides several benefits such as intimacy, sense of sharing, and stronger group attraction (IJsselsteijn, van Baren & van Lanen, 2003) and positively related to self-esteem (Lee & Robbins, 1998), life satisfaction (Siebert, Mutran, & Reitzes, 1999), self-efficacy, subjective well-being, self-reported mental health (Brown, Hoye, & Nicholson, 2012), and is negatively correlated with higher trait anxiety (Lee & Robbins, 1998), adjustment difficulties (Duru & Poyrazli, 2011), depression and suicidal ideation (Vanderhorst & McLaren, 2005).

1.1. Loneliness

Loneliness can be characterized as a negative social emotion and distressing feeling. Loneliness originates from having feelings of being

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isolated and the judgment that one's social relationships are inadequate (Newall, 2010; Pincus & Sorenson, 2001). Loneliness can be defined as having problems in establishing desired levels of intimate attached relationships with other people in connection with the perceived stress caused by separation from the attached thing (Weiss, 1973) and it is closely related to the perception of unmet intimate and social needs (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Additionally, Marangoni and Ickes (1989) stated that there are at least three important points for the definition of loneliness: "(1) loneliness is a subjective experience that may be uncorrelated with objective social isolation; (2) this subjective experience is an aversive psychological state for the lonely individual; and (3) the onset and origin of loneliness can be traced to some form of social relationship deficit" (p. 93).

Loneliness is a subjective experience and it is not the same construct as aloneness. Although people who live alone may experience loneliness more than those who have a partner, loneliness and being alone does not mean the same thing (Henderson, Scott, & Kay, 1986). Loneliness is an undesirable experience and an individual may suffer from loneliness in spite of being surrounded by too many people. On the other hand, aloneness may be desirable and people may prefer to be alone to improve creativity, concentration or some other skills (Luanaigh & Lawlor, 2008). Wilson and colleagues stated that loneliness refers to not having satisfaction from social interactions rather than their absence. Thus, individuals may have several social connections but they can report loneliness and high levels of connectivity would not always correspond to low levels of loneliness. Some variables such as emotional repair may influence the level of loneliness (Albo et al., 2014).

Paul, Ayiss, and Ebrahim (2006) indicated that loneliness is the most significant predictor of psychological distress. Additional research reveals a positive correlation between loneliness and depressive mood (Golden et al., 2009), poor functional health (Luo, Hawkey, Waite, & Cacioppo, 2012), attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance (Deniz, Hamarta, & Ari, 2005; Wei, Russel, & Zakalik, 2005), poor self-efficacy (Fry & Debats, 2002), neuroticism (Stokes, 1985) social anxiety and shyness (Erözkan, 2009). Otherwise, loneliness was found negative related to some adaptive constructs such as self-esteem and resilience (Güloğlu & Karairmak, 2010), life satisfaction (Akhunlar, 2010), social self-efficacy (Wei et al., 2005) and well-being (Golden et al., 2010).

1.2. Subjective happiness as a mediator

One of the main mission of the positive psychology movement is to understand factors that predicts the level of well-being and to make effective interventions enhance happiness and to build thriving individuals rather than neglecting the positive aspect of human potential (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Subjective happiness is one of the most important constructs of positive psychology and can be defined as subjective assessment of whether a person is happy or unhappy. Subjective happiness, which depends on the question of why some people are happier than others, includes how people perceive, interpret, recall, and actually experience life events in a positive or negative way (Lyubomirsky, 2001; Lyubomirsky & Tucker, 1998). Diener (1984) highlighted that level of subjective happiness or subjective well-being is closely related to the balance of positive and negative affect and overall life satisfaction.

Subjective happiness is something desirable and can be discussed as a state of mind or feeling characterized by pleasure or satisfaction (Lin, Lin, & Wu, 2010). People who report subjective happiness have more positive thoughts about themselves (Lee & Im, 2007), perceive recent experiences in their lives as more enjoyable (Matlin & Gawron, 1979), and more often review negative experiences with a sense of humor (Liu, 2012). Previous research has shown a positive association between subjective happiness and adaptive variables such as life satisfaction and subjective vitality and maladaptive variables such as problematic Facebook use (Uysal, Satici, Satici, & Akin, 2014; Uysal, Satici, & Akin,

2013; Satici & Uysal, 2015). Diener and Seligman (2002) investigated the factors that related to high happiness and showed that having good social relations is necessary for happiness. They also indicated that happy people have satisfying social relationships and spend little time alone. Similarly, Lyubomirsky, Tkach, and DiMatteo (2006) stated that experiencing less loneliness and satisfaction with friendships, which is related to social connectedness, may be the best predictors of happiness. On the other hand, subjective happiness has been found to relate negatively to the depressive symptoms (Chaplin, 2006) that are closely associated with loneliness which is one of the major precursor of depression (Lau, Chan, & Lau, 1999). Additionally, Öztürk and Mutlu (2010) suggested that students who experience social anxiety and interaction anxiety feel unhappier than others.

Based on previous literature, we hypothesize that subjective happiness may play a mediator role on the relationship between social connectedness and loneliness. In other words, it was expected that those who reported a high level of social connectedness would report less loneliness and subjective happiness would exert a mediator effect on the impact of social connectedness on loneliness.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants of this study were 325 university students who were studying at two different universities in the west of Turkey. Thus, the participants have similar socio-economic status. Of the participants, 178 (54.8%) were female and 147 (45.2%) were male. The mean age of the participants was 20.96 ($SD = 1.85$) with a range of 18–28. Of the participants, 94 (28.9%) were freshmen, 105 (32.3%) were sophomores, 48 (14.8%) were juniors, and 78 (24%) were seniors.

2.2. Data collection tools

2.2.1. Social Connectedness Scale (Lee & Robbins, 1995)

The scale includes 8 items (I catch myself losing all sense of connectedness with society) and each item of the scale is rated on a 1 to 6-point rating scale in which 1 indicates strongly disagree and 6 strongly agree. The total score can range from 8 to 48, with the higher score indicating higher general social connectedness level. Internal consistency coefficient in the original study was found as $\alpha = .91$. A Turkish adaptation of the scale was conducted by Duru (2007). Factorial analysis was confirmed in Turkish culture and also the internal consistency coefficient was reported as highly significant ($\alpha = .90$; Duru, 2007). Internal consistency coefficient in the present study was found as $\alpha = .91$.

2.2.2. Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999)

The scale includes four items (e.g., I think I am a happy person) and each item of the scale is rated on a 1 (very unhappy) to 7 (very happy) point rating. The total score can range from 4 to 28, with the higher score indicating higher subjective happiness level. A Turkish adaptation of this scale was conducted by Akin and Satici (2011). In the Turkish adaptation study, the results of confirmatory factor analysis revealed that the Turkish version of the scale was well fit (RMSEA = .000, NFI = .99, CFI = 1.00, IFI = 1.00, RFI = .98, GFI = 1.00, AGFI = .99 and SRMR = .015). Internal consistency coefficient in the present study was found as $\alpha = .71$.

2.2.3. UCLA Loneliness Scale (ULS-8; Hays & DiMatteo, 1987)

The scale includes 8 items (e.g., There is no one I can turn to) that are scored on a four-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "never" to "always" making the total score range from 8 to 32. The higher scores indicate greater loneliness level. A Turkish adaptation of the scale was conducted by Dogan, Çotok, and Gocet Tekin (2011). The factor structure of the Turkish version of the scale was well fit (RMSEA = .066,

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