Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction in Irish Children

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Loneliness is a common condition that whilst being widely experienced is neglected as a focus for research. Perceived by many as a problem experienced by the elderly, scant attention has been paid to the preponderance and severity of this condition amongst other population groups, such as children. The past decade has however seen a growing body of research into loneliness experienced by persons with learning disabilities, whom have been found to report greater levels of both loneliness and peer rejection than their non-disabled peers (Pearl, 1992; Marglit & Ben Dov, 1995).

It has been defined as "a sense of deprivation in one's social relationships" (Murphy and Kupshik, 1992, p3) and as the psychological state that results from discrepancies between a person's desired and actual relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Rook (1984), on the other hand defined it as "an enduring condition of emotional distress that arises when a person feels estranged from, misunderstood, or rejected by others and/or lacks appropriate social partners for desired activities, particularly activities that provide a sense of social integration and opportunities for emotional intimacy"(p1391).

Beck & Young (1978) identified three types of loneliness, chronic, arising from social deficits across a number of years, situational, arising from the ending of a relationship and transient, reflecting short bouts of loneliness that most persons experience periodically as a consequence of brief episodes of minor social deficiency.

According to Peplau & Perlman (1982) loneliness has three components, an unpleasant and distressful affective experience, a subjective-cognitive experience, incorporating poor reflective self-monitoring, and a deficiency in social relationships. When a person

is dissatisfied with their present network of social relationships and feels unable to improve them, loneliness is experienced.

Simply measuring the number of social relationships a person has is thus inadequate as a measure of loneliness as loneliness depends on how the person appraises these. This appraisal is in turn influenced by a wide variety of factors such as mood, sex, age, cultural norms, social comparison and so on (Murphy & Kupshik, 1992).

In contrast to this, Weiss (1973) distinguished between 'social' and 'emotional' loneliness and such a distinction has been supported by various other research studies (Russell, Cutrona, Rose & Yurko, 1984). Social loneliness is perceived as originating from the absence of a network of social relationships or from feeling that you are not part of a group with such persons with feelings of 'being left out' and 'not belonging' cited. Emotional loneliness on the other hand, is experienced as an aching emptiness, having its genesis in a lack of a close, intimate attachment to another person with such persons reporting that 'no-one really understands/knows them or cares about them'.

Construing loneliness from a psychoanalytic perspective, Klien (1990) contended that humans all experience an *"unsatisfied longing for an understanding without words-ultimately for the earliest relationship with the mother. This longing contributes to the sense of loneliness and derives from the depressive feeling of an unretrievable loss"* (p301). According to Klien, the roots of loneliness are in the paranoid anxiety experienced by the infant through projection of anxiety stemming from inner life and death instinct conflict onto the mother. In addition, projection of components of the

self contributes to feelings of having lost parts of the self and of not being in full possession of one self also contribute to feelings of loneliness.

Adopting a pragmatic approach to the measurement of loneliness in childhood and adolescence, Marcoen & Goosens (1993) differentiated between measures of parent and peer loneliness, taking these to be the most salient relationships at these times. They also saw 'aversion to' and 'affinity for' aloneness as complementary measures to parent and peer loneliness, all of which constitute the multidimensional Louvain Loneliness Scale for Children and Adolescents.

Many variables have been found to correlate with loneliness including poor social skills (Gerson & Perlman, 1979), low self-esteem and personality characteristics, such as attributional style and shyness (Ames, Ames & Garrison, 1997), lower rates of self-disclosure (Chelune, Sultan & Williams, 1980), social rejection and isolation (LoCoco & Zapulla, 1997) as well as fewer social activities (Russell, Peplau &Ferguson, 1980). The question however of whether these contribute to loneliness or vice-versa is very difficult to answer but many would behavioural manifestations of deficient social skill as causally linked to loneliness (Jones, Hobbs & Hockenbury, 1982). Loneliness has also been found to be associated with a variety of serious individual and social problems such as health problems and overuse of the health services (Broadhead, Kaplan & James, 1983; Lynch, 1976), drug abuse and alcoholism, (Nerviano & Gross, 1976; Pittel, 1971), anxiety (Jones, Freemon & Goswick, 1981), suicide (Diamant & Windholz, 1981), depression (Anderson & Harvey, 1988) and delinquency (Brennan & Auslander, 1979). Loneliness has been construed by Sullivan (1953), as a central ingredient of all psychopathology with the struggle to find relief from it as a key

motivating factor in much human behaviour. As such, tackling loneliness may thus represent an effective means in the prevention and treatment of such conditions.

Looking at gender and loneliness, women have been reported to be more apt to acknowledge their loneliness than men due to the negative consequences (reaction of others) of admission being less for women (Borys & Perlman, 1985).

Stereotypes deem that it is less socially acceptable for men to express emotional distress or weakness and thus they are less likely to identify themselves as lonely than their women. This is even despite men scoring more lonely than their females in loneliness measures such as the UCLA (Dickens & Perlman, 1981). Yet, with adolescents, Marcoen and Goosens (1993) concluded that adolescent girls report feeling more negative about being alone than their male peers.

It has only been in recent years that research into children's loneliness has been undertaken with approximately 10% of children across studies being found to report frequent loneliness (Asher, Hymel & Renshaw, 1984). The relative lack of research into loneliness in childhood has been partly due to a reluctance to believe that children, particularly young children, were vulnerable to feelings of loneliness. For example, Sullivan (1953) wrote that loneliness could not be experienced until preadolescence when a need for intimacy in a one-to-one relationship evolves and Weiss (1973) proposed that loneliness is probably not experienced until adolescence when parents are relinquished as attachment figures. However, recent studies have established that children from the age of six to seven years have an understanding of loneliness (Cassidy & Asher, 1989; Hayden, Tarulli & Hymel, 1988) reporting conceptions of loneliness similar to those of adults. Children from this age report loneliness as being

emotional in nature (associated in particular with unpleasant emotions), related to unfulfilled relationship provisions and often associated with several types of traumatic events or situations such as conflict, rejection, moving to an unfamiliar place and being ignored (Hayden et al., 1988).

Looking at loneliness in relation to sociometric status, several studies have established that self-reported measures of loneliness and social dissatisfaction show significant negative correlations with high (popular) peer status and that rejected children report significantly greater loneliness than their nonrejected peers (Asher & Wheeler, 1985; Asher & Williams, 1987; Cassidy & Asher,1989, Crick & Ladd, 1988). Hymel et al. (1983) in turn found that lonelier children are more likely to view social failure as internally caused and stable and this role of attributional style in loneliness was also found by Bukowski & Ferber (1987).

This study served as an exploratory study to determine the prevalence of loneliness and social dissatisfaction in Irish school children by gathering normative data on this and to investigate whether any gender differences are evident.

Method

Participants

A total of 665 children (373 boys, 292 girls) aged over ten to under thirteen years of age were sampled (see Table 1) from twenty-seven primary schools across fourteen counties of the Irish Republic. Out of thirty schools initially contacted by letter, 27 (90 %) agreed to participate. Nine mixed-sex, nine male and nine female only schools made-up the sample. The three schools that refused to participate cited as their reason, the lack of follow-up counselling support for children who may require it after completing the questionnaire. A total of 52 pupils (32 male; 20 female) were absent from their schools on the day the questionnaires were administered in their schools.

Materials

The twenty-four item Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction questionnaire designed by Asher et al.(1984) and revised by both Asher & Wheeler (1985) and Cassidy & Asher (1992) was used in this study. The sixteen principal items addressed children's feelings of loneliness (e.g. "Are you lonely at school ?"), feelings of social adequacy versus inadequacy (e.g. "Are you good at working with other children ?"), subjective estimations of peer status (e.g. "Do you have lots of friends at school ?") and judgements of whether important relationship provisions are being met (e.g. "Are there children you can go to when you need help at school ?"). Interspersed between these were eight filler items to do with children's hobbies and activities (e.g. "Do you like to paint and draw?"). These served to make the child feel more comfortable about revealing their feelings and experiences on the principal items.

Children were required to respond to each item by answering "yes", "sometimes" or "no", the response format employed by Cassidy & Asher (1992).

In addition, children were asked to fill-in whether they were a boy or a girl, their first-name, their date-of-birth and how many brothers and sisters they had.

Procedure

The study was carried-out across the months of March and April 1996. The schools were first contacted by letter and this was followed-up by a telephone conversation to arrange a suitable date and time for the school to be visited.

Fifteen female students studying for their Diploma in Applied Social Studies, in Athlone Regional Technical College in the Irish midlands, visited the schools and administered the questionnaires. All had received a lecture course on research skills and a workshop specifically on the study prior to its onset and it had been emphasised to each researcher to look-out for signs of upset in the children in case any were distressed by the procedure. If this happened, they were told to tell that child(ren) that they did not have to complete the form if they did not wish to as they had plenty of forms anyhow. The researcher would also then have to speak with both the teacher and child to discuss what upset the child.

Before the questionnaire was administered, children were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, that there were no right or wrong answers and that they should fill-in the questionnaire as truthfully as possible. They were then trained to use the response format by being given three practice items (e.g. "Do you have cornflakes for breakfast?, Do you like chocolate ?, Do you enjoy doing homework ?").

Once it was evident that the children understood the task, the researcher then read each question out, one at a time and before moving on to the next question she ensured each child had completed the question (by moving around the room checking).

During the questionnaire administration, the class teacher remained in a corner of the room reading.

After all of the questions were read out, the researcher then went around the class, collecting each form and ensuring that each was fully completed. She then thanked the class, and teacher, for their co-operation. No child was upset by the procedure.

Results

Factor Analysis

A factor analysis (quartimax rotation) of the loneliness questionnaire was carried out and all of the principal items and none of the filler items loaded above 0.40 on the principal factor. Factor loadings for each item and the item-to-factor correlations are shown in Table 2.

Scoring

Scoring replies to loneliness principal items was "Yes" = 3, "Sometimes" = 2 and "No" =1, (items 1, 3, 4, 8, 10, 14, 16, 18, 22 & 24 had reverse scoring) the minimum possible loneliness total score that a child could report was 16 and the maximum was 48. The median loneliness/social dissatisfaction total from the data was 19 and the mean was 20.27 reflecting an outlier effect.

Statistical analysis of the data revealed that the majority of the children did not report experiencing loneliness. From Table 3 it is clear that 65% of the sample scored a

loneliness/social dissatisfaction total that was below the mean total score. The remaining 35% of the sample though did report a loneliness/social dissatisfaction total that was above average with 12% scoring a total one standard deviation (5) or greater. Little difference arouse between the three age groups in the percentage distribution of their totals.

Looking at the distribution of children's responses to the items, from Table 4 is clear that, nearly 2% (n = 14) said that they were lonely at school with an additional 11% (n = 74) indicating that they sometimes were lonely at school. Only 0.6% (n = 4) children indicated that they had no friends at school but this rises to 3% (n = 20) when those who indicated that they sometimes had no friends at school are included.
As anticipated, very little variation arouse between the age groups given their closeness in age.

Comparing boys and girls, little difference arouse between them despite females being more apt to acknowledge their loneliness than males (Borys & Perlman, 1985). An independent Ss t-test using total scores found no significant difference (t = 5.4, df = 628, p≤ 0.59). Looking at their responses to the specific principal items, there was a striking similarity between the responses of males and females except for the item "Are there children you can go to when you need help at school ?" where boys reported significantly lower positive scores (t = 2.8, df = 663, p≤ 0.004).

Discussion

A range of self-report measures have been devised to assess children's feelings of loneliness in the family home and school contexts (Asher, Hymel & Renshaw, 1984; Heinlein & Spinner, 1985; Marcoen & Brumagne, 1985). Such self-report measures have reported high levels of internal reliability (alphas = .09) and stability over time (correlations of over 0.55 with scores 1 year later) (Cassidy & Asher, 1988; Hymel et al., 1983). The factor analysis carried-out on this measure reaffirms that carried out on this measure by such studies.

The most striking result of the study is that, using the median split, slightly over a third of the sample reported some feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction with approximately 13% of the sample reported sometimes, or more often, feeling lonely at school. Over a third indicated that they only sometimes found it easy to make new friends or to be good at working with other children in school. In addition, if those who responded 'sometimes' are included in the scores, over a quarter of the sample responded that children in school did not like them, found it hard to get children to like them and felt left out of things at school.

If the infrequent (i.e. sometimes) occurrence of these experiences are not a source of anxiety to the children themselves then these results perhaps do not warrant significant concern. If however, children are suffering anxiety because of such experiences then they deserve to be a focus of attention for both teachers and parents.

The high usage of 'sometimes' as a response by the sample was found to cloud the results as it may reflect a tendency to respond in what is perceived as a more socially acceptable response or the impact of 'the middle position' in answer formats.

Problems have been identified in the validity of self-report measures with studies being suspect to an underreporting of loneliness due to participants providing socially desirable or defensive responses as there is a social stigma attached to loneliness (Gordon, 1976). Using additional measures such as peer popularity, studies have though found less reason to doubt the data of children who do express feelings of loneliness than when they do not (Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel & Williams, 1990; Kagan, Hans, Markowitz, Lopez & Sigal, 1982). Additionally, it was emphasised to the children in this study that there were no right or wrong answers and that the questionnaire should be completed as truthfully as possible.

Kagan and his colleagues (1982) found that when children acknowledge undesirable personal attributes, these tend to be confirmed with additional measures using peers or teachers. In contrast, positive self-evaluations were suspect for over a third of the sample, suggesting that some children who report positive feelings may in fact be experiencing dissatisfaction. (Kagan et al.,1982).

It should be noted however that in comparison to similar American studies (Asher et al., 1984; Asher & Wheeler, 1985; Cassidy & Asher 1992), a much smaller proportion of children reported loneliness at school. This difference was even more extreme if the 'sometimes' response category was not involved in the comparison as then, for example, only 2% of this sample in contrast to 10-12% in the aforementioned American studies expressed feeling lonely at school.

Differences between studies in age and habitation (urban/rural) of sample as well as cultural factors such as larger schools, differences in child-rearing and community and family life may also have contributed to the contrast in the results found.

Variations in how the instrument was administered and features such as number of researchers deployed, classroom climate and the impact of siblings and neighbourhood friends classroom climate also need to be considered. The present study used 15 researchers in contrast to 4 and 2 researchers employed in the American studies cited previously. All of the Irish researchers did however participate in a course on research skills and were given detailed instructions in a workshop on how to administer the instrument.

Looking at the potential impact of classroom climate upon the scores, teachers have been found to vary in how much they facilitate or hinder peer interactions for children who are timid and shy and take less initiative towards others. In addition, high levels of bullying in a school have been found to lead to higher loneliness scores being reported, particularly by submissive-rejected type children (Asher et al., 1990). Most teachers consider loneliness and social dissatisfaction as an important area for teacher intervention but report being inadequately trained for and prepared to deal with pupil loneliness and social distress (Page, 1991). Teachers could be taught to use school-based measures such as self-esteem programmes (Brage et al.,1993) incorporating components addressing role and perspective taking skills as well as reflective monitoring skills which have been found to be effective in overcoming loneliness. In addition teachers could be taught to explore pupil attributional style in order to enable the children to have a greater self-understanding and to empower them to overcome

any self-defeating cognitive style (Jones et al., 1982). Future studies are needed to assess the impact of such programmes upon child loneliness and social dissatisfaction.

Siblings, family connectedness and school or neighbourhood friends may also have a buffering effect on potentially loneliness inducing experiences in the school context. This perspective is indicative of a systemic view on loneliness, seeing human relationships as embedded within socio-structural contexts (Margalit, 1994). In this study, data was collected on sibling number and gender and its relationship to loneliness has yet to be explored.

No difference arose between the age groups, as anticipated and no gender difference was found. The similarity of scores between the age groups may be a reflection of the proximity in age of these groups (10, 11 & 12 years) while the lack of overall difference between the sexes may be due to:

1. there being no difference

2. lack of sensitivity in the instrument to pick-up any differences, perhaps via a wider range of response categories

3. the age of the children as known studies that have found gender differences in loneliness have all being carried-out with adults (Brage et al., 1993, Borys & Perlman, 1985)

The significant higher positive score of females as compared to males on the item "Are there children you can go to when you need help at school" may reflect the greater social acceptability/desirability of females to seek help or assistance (MacCoby & Jacklin, 1979) or may indicate that female friendships in children are of a more

caring nature. Research studies, including those of Jones & Dembo (1989) with 8 year olds and Youniss & Smollar (1985) with teenagers, has already indicated that female friendships are more intimate than those of their male peers and that girls value intimacy and personal knowledge of their friends more than males.

Conclusion

This study identified that slightly over a third of the 10-12 year old children sampled reported some general feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction in school with approximately 13% of the sample specifically reporting sometimes, or more often, feeling lonely at school. Whilst the proportion of children reporting loneliness is low in contrast to studies in other countries, the high use of the answer option 'sometimes' as opposed to 'yes' or 'no' in this study may have led to an underestimation of the loneliness and social dissatisfaction reported.

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Table 1 Distribution of Participants by Age and Sex

Age Range	Males	Females	Total	% of sample*
10-11 yrs	64	60	124	19
11-12 yrs	220	169	389	58
12-13 yrs	89	63	152	23
Total	373	292	665	100
% of sample	56	44		

Table 2 Factor Loadings and Item-to-Total Correlations

Items	Factor Loading	Item-to-Total Score Correlation
1. Is it easy for you to make new friends at school ?	.57	.59
3. Do you have other children to talk to at school ?	.51	.49
4. Are you good at working with other children at school ?	.45	.48
6. Is it hard for you to make friends at school ?	.71	.72
8. Do you have lots of friends at school ?	.70	.69
9. Do you feel alone at school ?	.68	.66
10. Can you find a friend when you need one ?	.58	.60
12. Is it hard to get children in school to like you ?	.71	.73
14. Do you have children to play with at school ?	.57	.51
16. Do you get along with other children at school ?	.62	.60
17. Do you feel left out of things at school ?	.65	.65
18. Are there children you can go to when you need help at school ?	.48	.52
20. Is it hard for you to get along with other children at school ?	.71	.69
21. Are you lonely at school ?	.70	.66
22. Do the children at school like you ?	.62	.63
24. Do you have friends at school ?	.50	.43

Filler items are not included.

Table 3 Percentage Distribution of Sample by Age and Total

Age/Total:	*16-20*	*21-25*	*26-30*	*31-35*	*36-40*	*41-45*
10-11 years	65.4	25.0	4.0	4.0	0.8	0.8
11-12 years	65.0	22.0	7.0	3.5	2.0	0.5
12-13 years	64.0	23.0	9.8	2.6	0.6	0.0
Total	65.0	23.0	7.0	3.0	1.5	0.5

Table 4 Percentage Distribution of Responses to Items

Items	Yes			Sometimes			No		
	tot	ml	fm	tot	ml	fm	tot	ml	fm
Is it easy for you to make new friends at school?	60.3	61	59	35.3	34	37	4.4	5	4
Do you have other children to talk to at school?	95.0	94	97	3.4	4	2	1.6	2	1
Are you good at working with other children at school?	63.8	66	61	33.5	30	38	2.7	4	1
Is it hard for you to make friends at school?	6.8	4	3	24.5	23	26	68.7	73	71
Do you have lots of friends at school?	86.5	86	86	5.4	5	7	8.1	9	7
Do you feel alone at school?	1.5	2	1	13.5	12	16	85.0	86	83
Can you find a friend when you need one?	73.6	71	78	22.4	25	19	4.0	4	3
Is it hard to get children in school to like you?	9.0	10	8	29.3	29	29	61.7	61	63
Do you have children to play with at school?	93.2	94	93	6.0	5	7	0.8	1	0
Do you get along with other children at school?	77.4	78	76	21.0	20	22	1.6	2	2
Do you feel left out of things at school?	5.0	4	6	25.3	25	26	69.7	71	68
Are there children you can go to when you need help at school ?	71.4	67	77	20.0	22	17	8.6	11	6
Is it hard for you to get along with other children at school ?	4.9	5	5	23.4	22	25	71.7	73	70
Are you lonely at school ?	1.8	2	2	11.0	10	13	87.2	88	85
Do the children at school like you ?	70.2	68	73	28.3	30	26	1.5	2	1
Do you have friends at school ?	97.0	96	98	2.4	3	2	0.6	1	0

tot: percentage of total sample   *ml*: percentage of males   *fl*: percentage of females