The Relationship between Perceived Social Support and Loneliness among University Students

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Abstract

Loneliness is one of the serious concerns in adolescence which might negatively influence a person's coping with his/her environment. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the relationship between perceived social support and loneliness among university students. This study is descriptive with correlational design. To this end, using Krejcie & Morgan Table (1970), 327 students were selected through multistage sampling in the University of Kashan. The respondents filled out Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988) and UCLA Loneliness scale (1980) questionnaires. Stepwise Regression Analysis was run in SPSS-22 to analyze the results. The findings showed that social support from important others, friends and family can best predict loneliness in students, respectively. Overall, they can explain 21% of variance in loneliness. Hence, students with higher social support scores are less likely to feel lonely.
Keywords: Social Support, Loneliness, University Students.

Introduction

One of the most important aspects of human development is socialization. As living a social life is part of our nature, the necessity to have contact with others is inevitable. Social growth includes a healthy relationship with others which is in accordance with the situation. Nurturing a mature person requires special attention to social growth as a key factor in the person's life (Chary, 2003). Although social relations and their different aspects have a long history, further in-depth research is still required (Sedigh-Sarvestani, 2006).

Loneliness is an unpleasant experience that occurs when one's social network is defective both quantitatively and qualitatively (Pilav & Perelman, 1982). Recent studies suggest loneliness

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is a widespread phenomenon, and 25-50 % of people experience it based on their age and gender (Chang et al., 2006). Many emotional disorders are deeply rooted in feelings of isolation and loneliness, and since humans are social beings, they undoubtedly need the support, comfort, and confidence provided in their collective life (Lumin et al., 2006). Loneliness is a multi-dimensional phenomenon with different causes and degrees of intensity. For instance, the loneliness of a child who has recently lost his/her mother is different from the loneliness of another child who does not have any playmates (Heinrich & Gallons, 2006). In other words, loneliness is an unpleasant personal experience similar to the state when someone thinks of himself/herself as being distinct from others. Such feeling is manifested in a number of observable behavioral problems such as sadness, anger, and depression, and shows the discrepancy between one's expectations and aspirations and the possibility of fulfilling them in social relations, which results in avoiding contact with others (Elhagyn, 2004).

Due to the fact that most students face loneliness (Pamuka & Mediyan, 2010), it is essential to explore its causes and consequences. Apparently, perceived social support is one of the factors closely associated with loneliness. Social support is the person's beliefs about the support received from family, friends and others (Cottrell, 2007). Social support is a set of general and specific supportive behaviors that help relieve stress. Research has shown that this issue has enormous impacts on people's mental, social, and physical health; in other words, those with high social support enjoy a higher level of physical, social, and psychological health and are able to cope with stress more successfully than others (Robert et al., 1997). In other words, social support is the help offered in various ways by others in stressful situations. Social support has a substantial protective effect; the close and supportive relationships with family, friends, colleagues, and society have a positive role in improving performance in workplace, dealing with problems in life, improving general adaptiveness, and developing physical and psychological well-being (Chantelle, Russ, & Egeland, 2007). Extensive social networks decrease the person's vulnerability to stress and psychological disorders. The prevalence of social isolation and its subsequent decreased social support result in great loneliness. Those who experience loneliness will fail to establish and maintain a friendly relationship with others due to their negative expectations about a relationship and lack of necessary social skills. These people are anxious in their social relations (Solano & Kovaster, 1989) and are also sensitive to rejection (Russell et al., 1980). They face difficulties in establishing friendly relations, doing social activities, participating in groups, enjoying parties, and controlling their environment (Horowitz & French, 1979). They also consider themselves negative, worthless, inferior, unpopular, and socially incompetent (Jones et. al, 1981; Jones & Moore, 1987; Jones, Sansun, & Helm, 1983) and have lower self-esteem (Heinrich & Gallons, 2006).

Therefore, the present study aims to examine whether there is a significant relationship between perceived social support and loneliness; in addition, the role of social support as a strong predictor of loneliness will be explored.

Methods
This study is descriptive with correlational design. The population consisted of all undergraduate and graduate students of the University of Kashan in 2015-2016 academic year. The participants were randomly selected using multi-stage sampling. The sample size was determined as 320 participants according to Krejcie & Morgan Table (1970). After explaining the objectives of the

study to the participants and reassuring them about their anonymous participation, they were asked to fill out Perceived Social Support (Zimet, et al, 1988) and UCLA loneliness scale (1980). The collected data were analyzed through Pearson Correlation and Stepwise Regression Analysis in SPSS-22.

Instruments
Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)
The MSPSS (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988) is a 12-item self-report questionnaire scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree). There are three subscales on different areas of support, namely, family, friends, and significant others. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal reliability was 0.88. The authors report test-retest reliability of .85 over a 2-3 month period, along with moderate construct validity. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated as 0.82 in the present study.

The UCLA Loneliness Scale (UCLA-LS)
UCLA-LS (Russell, Peplau & Cutrona, 1980) was used to assess the subjective feelings of loneliness or social isolation. There are 20 items seeking respondents' opinions about the extent to which they agreed with the description. The responses ranged from 1 (not at all) to 4 (often), with a total possible aggregate score range of 20–80. The higher the score, the more loneliness the person experienced. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal reliability of this instrument is .94 (ibid).

Results
Descriptive statistics including mean and standard deviation, and internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) and bivariate inter-correlation coefficients (Pearson's r) for all measures are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. *Descriptive indices and intercorrelations between primary variables*

	1	2	3	4	Mean	Std. Deviation
1) loneliness	-				38.88	8.83
2) Perceived social support	-.46[**]	-			60.28	8.36
3) Social support (family)	-.31[**]	.63**	-		20.84	2.99
4) Social support (friends)	-.34[**]	.78**	.210**	-	19.90	4.36
5) Social support (important other)	-.36[**]	.79**	.35**	.39**	19.53	3.85

According to Table 1, perceived social support and its subscales including family, friends, and important others have inverse, significant relationship with students' loneliness. Stepwise multiple regression analysis was used to predict loneliness and determine the distinctive role of each perceived social support component in explaining loneliness variance and detecting the best predictors.

Table 2. Summary of the Regression Model

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1. Social support (important other)	.367[a]	.134	.132	8.2333863	.134	49.396	1	318	.000
2 . Social support (friend)	.427[b]	.182	.177	8.0154229	.048	18.530	1	317	.000
3 . Social support (family)	.461[c]	.213	.205	7.8765318	.031	12.278	1	316	.001

The results of loneliness regression analysis based on perceived social support subscales (Table 2) indicated that social support from important others (ΔR^2= .134, F(1,318)= 49.396, P< .001), social support from friends (ΔR^2= .048, F(1,317)= 18.530, P< .001), and social support from family (ΔR^2= .031, F(1,316)= 12.278, P= .001) could predict about 21% of loneliness variance in Three steps, respectively. Table 3 demonstrates standardized and unstandardized regression coefficients in the three steps.

Table 3. *Standardized and unstandardized coefficients of stepwise regression of loneliness based on perceived social support*

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig
		B	SE	Beta		
1	(Constant)	55.318	2.383		23.216	.000
	Social support (important other)	-.841	.120	-.367	-7.028	.000
2	(Constant)	60.675	2.632		23.049	.000
	Social support (important other)	-.623	.127	-.272	-4.903	.000
	Social support (friend)	-.483	.112	-.238	-4.305	.000
3	(Constant)	68.864	3.486		19.754	.000
	Social support (important other)	-.484	.131	-.211	-3.696	.000
	Social support (friend)	-.451	.111	-.223	-4.077	.000
	Social support (family)	-.553	.158	-.188	-3.504	.001

According to Table 3, loneliness could be predicted indirectly by types of social support in three steps. Social support from important others best predicts loneliness.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the relationship between social support and loneliness among students. The results showed that there is a significant, negative relationship between social support and loneliness. The findings are consistent with Len and Gown's (1992) study. According to their research, individuals with higher loneliness show less adaptiveness and self-

development, and they are less rational, socially competent, and likely to be selected as a friend. In addition, they show fewer honest behaviors and act passively. It has been shown that loneliness is related to a number of social and psychological problems such as alcoholism, suicide, depression, anxiety, addiction, low self-esteem, delinquency, and academic failure (Len & Grown, 1992). Similarly, a study by Wang, et al. (2011) on the relationship between loneliness and social support indicates a negative relationship between family performance and social support, in one hand, and loneliness, on the other hand. The results of a study by Duro (2008) also indicate that social support has a relationship with social relations and has a mediating role in developing loneliness. Dong, Beck and Simon's (2009) study also suggests that social support is one of the factors playing a crucial role in reducing loneliness among adolescents, young adults, adults, and the elderly.

Thus, according to the findings of the present study, it can be argued that a strong support network could be considered as the opposite point of loneliness. Those who have fewer ties with individuals or groups have fewer social support networks and are more likely to develop loneliness. Therefore, the social support system as a structural functional asset creates mutual commitments between people where one feels being loved and valued, experiences high self-esteem, and has satisfactory relationships, which in turn prevents the development of loneliness. As it was discussed before, since loneliness is deeply rooted in deficiencies in social relationships, those who are socially isolated tend to be less involved in friendship networks and do not participate in activities related to social institutions. Thus, receiving less support makes them feel even lonelier. Therefore, it can be concluded that reduced levels of perceived social support will pave the way for such mental, social problems as loneliness.

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