

Relationship between Loneliness and Shyness among College Students

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ABSTRACT

Loneliness has become a major concern among the young adult population, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic. Past studies have also focused on how shyness can lead to lack of interpersonal relationships and how this increases loneliness among people. The present study aims to assess the relationship between loneliness and shyness among college students. A total of 124 students (69 female and 55 male) pursuing their undergraduate courses at different colleges were asked to participate. The hypotheses formulated were a. The extent of loneliness and shyness is higher among college students. b. Loneliness and shyness are significantly related to each other. c. demographic variables significantly influence loneliness and shyness among college students. The selected sample was administered UCLA loneliness scale (Russel, 1996) and shyness assessment tests (D'Souza, 2006). The scales were shared among participants through Google forms. Once the data was collected, it was subjected to Chi-square test, Independent samples t test, one-way ANOVA and stepwise multiple regression analysis, to test the hypotheses using SPSS version 21. Results revealed that majority of the college students had moderate level of shyness followed by low level of shyness. A greater number of college students in the selected sample had average level of loneliness followed by high level of loneliness. Out of three domains only 2 domains of shyness – Cognitive Affective and Action oriented, were majorly predicted the loneliness. Course pursued and residential status did not have significant influence over shyness and loneliness scores of the sample selected. Strategies for reducing loneliness and shyness have been delineated.

Keywords: Loneliness, shyness, college students

Shyness is said to be an emotional state that is considered universal. It is accompanied by fear, negative self-evaluation and inhibitions in social situations. “Shyness is problematic or chronic, implicates an excessive concern about negative evaluation and/or an avoidance of participation in social situations that would otherwise be pleasurable or consequential to one’s professional or personal growth” (Zimbardo, 1998). Shyness consists of four domains, namely, physiological, cognitive, affective and behavioural (Henderson, Zimbardo & Carducci, 2010) Common examples for these could be increased heart rate, fear

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of judgement, feeling ashamed and staying away from people respectively. The biological basis of shyness, such as basal cortisol level has been studied. Children who were consistently quiet, timid and shy (referred to as the inhibited group) exhibited greater sympathetic reactivity. A low threshold of limbic-hypothalamic arousal to unexpected events was observed in these children which could have been influenced by other chronic environmental stressors (Kagan, Reznick, & Snidman, 1988)). But culture is also believed to have a major role on the levels of shyness exhibited by an individual. Studies (Gartstein et al., 2006; Porter et al., 2005) reveal that East Asian children are shyer and less likely to approach unfamiliar situations than children from the west. Thus culture does not just provide the guidelines for social behaviour but also provide meaning to shyness and the way it is evaluated and judged (Chen, 2018)). Studies have shown that shyness does influence personality and academic achievement (D'Souza, Urs & James, 2000), decreased performance among physical education students (D'Souza, Singh, & Basavarajappa, 2009), increased emotional and social maladjustment (D'Souza & Urs, 2001), shy individuals are in need of guidance needs especially in emotional and social domains (D'Souza, Urs, & Jayaraju, 2008) and less happy (Sreeshakumar, D'Souza, & Nagalakshmi, 2007). Shy individuals tend to be more lonely and on the verge of utilizing technology more (Chandrasekhar, D'Souza, and Rangaiah, 2012).

Loneliness is said to be “the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person’s network of social relations is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively” (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Both Shyness and Loneliness are said to have more negative effects on people, especially on students than positive ones. A study conducted on 10 to 15-year-old school children reveals that high levels of loneliness is associated with higher degrees of self-reported shyness. This also affected the feelings these children have towards their school negatively (Walker, 2011). Shyness and Loneliness might lead to maladjustment during school years, which might continue when the student enters university. Some useful interventions could be 1) Increasing social support 2) Working on and improving the social skills of individuals 3) More opportunities for social contact and 4) Addressing the social cognition of individuals (Masi, Chen, Hawkey, & Cacioppo, (2011).

METHOD

Sample:

In the present study, 124 students (69 female and 55 male) pursuing their undergraduate courses at different colleges were asked to participate. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25. These students had different residential status.

Tools employed

- a. *UCLA Loneliness Scale Version 3 (Russell, 1996)* - This self-reporting loneliness scale consists of 20 items related to various aspects of loneliness. The participants rate each item as either Never (1), Rarely (2), Sometimes (3) and Always (4). The items 1, 5,6,9,10,15,16,19,20 are reverse scored. This version of the UCLA Loneliness scale was used as it is a simplified version, which makes it easier for students to understand and respond. The minimum score that can be obtained by a participant is 20 and the maximum score is 80. The scores 30 or below indicate low level of loneliness, 31 to 50 indicate average level of loneliness and 51 and above indicate high level of loneliness. The UCLA Loneliness Scale is highly reliable. In internal consistency the range of the coefficient alpha is from .89 to .94. The reliability under test retest conditions over a span of one year is also high.

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- b. *Shyness Assessment Test (SAT) (D'Souza, 2006)* – The Shyness Assessment Test has 54 items. It has been divided into three domains – Cognitive Affective domain, Physiological Domain and Action Oriented Domain. The items in this self-reporting measure can be either rated as Yes (2), Can't Say (1) and No (0) by the participants. The total score can range between a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 108. A total score between 0-36 indicates low level of shyness, 37-72 indicates moderate level of shyness and a score of 73 and above indicates high level of shyness. Reliability indices of Cognitive affective, Physiological and action oriented domains are 0.826, 0.792 and 0.725 respectively. The Cronbach's alpha co-efficient score of the scale is 0.7119.

PROCEDURE

The first author personally contacted students living in different places across Karnataka and parts of Tamil Nadu. Google forms were sent to the students living in faraway places. The candidate also collected responses from students of Maharaja's College, Mysuru by giving each one a copy of both the scales. The participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential. A text message was attached with the Google forms, consisting of instructions and contact information to use in case of any confusion in the statements given in the scales. Oral instructions were given to the participants who the candidate met and the items were explained in case of any difficulty. After completing the collection of data, it was transferred to the computer.

RESULTS

Table 1 Results of product moment correlations between the domains of shyness and loneliness

Variable 1 Domains of shyness	Variable 2	Correlation Coefficient	P value
Cognitive affective	Loneliness	.549	.001
Physiological	Loneliness	.316	.001
Action oriented	Loneliness	.529	.001
Total shyness scores	Loneliness	.567	.001

All the obtained correlation coefficients were positive and significant between domains of shyness and loneliness scores, including total shyness scores. A significant positive correlation indicates that, higher the level of shyness, higher would be the loneliness.

Regression analysis

Table 2 Results of step-wise multiple regression-variables entered and R square and adjusted R² values

Model	Variables entered	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square
1	Cognitive/affective	.549	.302	.296
2	Action oriented	.593	.351	.341

When the scores of three domains of shyness were regressed on loneliness scores, out of three domains only 2 domains of shyness were majorly predicted the loneliness of the sample selected in the present study. The first variable to enter in to the equation was

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Cognitive/affective domain with the correlation coefficient of .549, squared R value of .302 and a contribution of 29.6%. The second variable to enter into the equation along with the Cognitive/affective domain of shyness was action oriented domain with combined correlation coefficient of .593, squared R value of .351 and a contribution of 34%. Both these domains contributed 35.1% of loneliness. However, physiological domain of shyness did not predict the loneliness of the selected sample.

Table 3 Results of step-wise multiple regression- Unstandardized and standardized Coefficients and significance values for t values

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	't' value	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	Constant	35.166	1.961		17.936	.001
	Cognitive/affective	.483	.067	.549	7.263	.001
2	Constant	34.551	1.909		18.102	.001
	Cognitive/affective	.312	.086	.355	3.649	.001
	Action oriented	.612	.202	.295	3.034	.003

The beta values obtained for the first predicted model-cognitive/affective domain were .549 and .355 respectively at steps 1 and 2. The beta value obtained for the second predicted model-Action oriented Domain was .295 at step 2. The t values obtained for both the constants and predicted models were found to be highly significant.

DISCUSSION

Significant relationships between loneliness and shyness were observed in many studies. A study (Somesha & D'Souza, 2009) on 720 adolescents that included both male and female revealed a significant correlation between shyness and loneliness and also the gender differences present. The results of ANOVA revealed that higher the scores of shyness, higher would be the loneliness experienced. Higher perceived loneliness was observed among females when compared to their male counterparts.

A similar study was conducted among American college students (Jackson, Fritch, Nagasaka, & Gunderson, 2002) which explained the association between shyness and loneliness. Variables that mediated the association were assessed. The association between shyness and loneliness remained statistically significant even after the impact of perceived expectations of rejection, interpersonal competence and social support was excluded. The following reasons were given by the authors to support the result; 1) There might be specific genetic factors that influence both shyness and loneliness. 2) Unexpected situations might lead shy individuals to experience higher levels of loneliness. In a study on "The influence of shyness on loneliness in a new situation" (Cheek & Busch, 1981), levels of loneliness at the start of the semester and end of the semester was measured among both shy and non-shy students. Shy students had a greater UCLA Loneliness score at the beginning of a new semester. The authors expected this result as shy individuals tend to display anxiety and inhibition in new situations. The loneliness score declined for both shy and non-shy students but was significant among those who were shy.

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It is found that shyness including all of its domains has a significant influence on loneliness. College students who feel shy might not approach other or initiate conversations which might result in them not making good friends. This might eventually lead to loneliness. Social support, self-image, opportunities provided in colleges for student interaction, etc. all contribute towards the feelings of shyness and loneliness. Contrary to previous studies residential status and the courses being pursued had no significant effect on shyness and loneliness. Future studies should consider whether gender differences in shyness and loneliness is prevalent in today's society. Whether, homes still remain as places of comfort and lack of loneliness should also be addressed. Future studies can also focus on specific courses that require individuals to not be shy and compare the results with that of students pursuing courses without such requirements.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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