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Loneliness among college students

Rowena P. Maliwanag

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Northern Illinois University

Loneliness Among College Students

A Thesis Submitted to the

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In Partial Fulfillment of the

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Family, Consumer, Nutrition Sciences

By

Rowena P. Maliwanag

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Capstone Approval Page

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Student Name: Rowena P. Maliwanag

Faculty Supervisor: Xiaolin Xie, Ph.D.

Faculty Approval Signature: Xiaolin Xie

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ABSTRACT:

Everyone experiences loneliness, but high levels of loneliness are related to depression, low self-esteem, psychosomatic illnesses, and even suicide. The purpose of this paper is two-fold: 1) to find out if gender, year in school, marital status, grade point average, owning a car, awareness and use of support services, religious beliefs, living arrangement, and race are significant factors in the level of loneliness, 2) to educate the public about loneliness and implement programs to help college students. The scope of this study is limited to only American students. International students were taken into account in the original research but due to low participation this group was left out of the analysis. The research method used in this study was survey, the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale. Major findings include no significant difference in levels of loneliness between females and males, and freshmen, sophomores, and juniors as compared to seniors and graduate students. Students who own a car are less likely to be lonely. Students who are married or have a romantic partner are less lonely than students who are divorced, separated, or single without a romantic partner, and Caucasian students reported a lower loneliness score than students with ethnic backgrounds.

Introduction All humans experience loneliness which at high levels, can be debilitating. College students are especially prone to the negative consequences of high levels of loneliness. This comes as no surprise to researchers since college students face a particularly unique life change. Psychologically, college students undergo maturation. They learn more about themselves, who they are, and what interests them. Going away to college is a significant change. All their familiar surroundings might be replaced by a large, unfamiliar, and distant institution. Other complications include losing old friendships and establishing new friendships. In college, students are faced with many challenges. They may be far away from home, sometimes for the first time in their entire lives. To make matters worse, by not owning or having a car some college students may not be able to return home as often as they would like. Socially, some students may find it difficult to meet new people at the beginning of their college years. It is essential to research, revise, and build upon previous studies on loneliness in order to understand, educate, and ultimately provide people a means to resist high levels of loneliness.

Literature Review

College students and loneliness: Although everyone experiences some level of loneliness, high levels of loneliness are related to depression, low self-esteem, psychosomatic illnesses, and even suicide (Medora & Woodward, 1986; Blai, 1989; Rokach, Bacanli, & Ramberan, 2000). A special concern has evolved for adolescents and young adults, especially of college age (Ponzetti, 1990; Rotenburg & Morrison, 1993; Rokach, 2000). Ponzetti and Cate (1988) defined loneliness as a self-perceived interpersonal problem in which an individual's network of relationships either decreased or became less satisfying than desired. Although loneliness may be experienced at any time,

important life changes seem to be associated with loneliness, such as going to college.

There are many factors that affect loneliness among college students some of which are: gender, year in school, status, grade point average, and race.

Gender differences: Loneliness affects males and females differently. The majority of studies using the Revised UCLA loneliness survey (Russell, 1996) revealed gender is not a significant factor. Although this is generally the case, results are mixed (Rotenburg & Morrison, 1993). In a study by Wiseman, Guttfreund, and Lurie (1995), males seeking counseling were more lonely than males not seeking counseling and females seeking and not seeking counseling. An implication of the study might be males who are indeed lonely might not admit they are because of the stigma surrounding lonely people. Also, males seeking counseling are more likely to admit their true feelings. In this study, I hypothesized that there would be a significant difference between gender on the mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale.

~ Events that occur over one's lifespan affects the loneliness perceived. With this said, age is important to analyze. The year in school is similar to the age of a student. Obviously, there are nontraditional students who can be thirty years of age or older and be first year students or freshmen. This study focuses primarily on college age students ages eighteen and over. Besides being an accessible population, studies confirm people in their late adolescence and early adulthood are at high risk for loneliness (Wiseman, Guttfreund, & Lurie, 1995). In Rokach and Brock's (1997) study on loneliness and the effects of life changes, the meaning of loneliness changes as one ages. Young adults, as defined in this study ages 21-30 years, contributed more

factors to loneliness than any other age group. Other studies by Rokach (2000), have similar results; Young adult ages 19-30 years of age experience higher levels of loneliness. Generally, the younger students, about eighteen or nineteen years of age are freshmen and sophomores. Freshmen and sophomores are especially susceptible to high levels of loneliness because they may not be familiar with or have adjusted well to their new surroundings. In this study, I hypothesized that there is a significant difference between freshmen, sophomores, juniors, as a group and seniors and graduate students, as another group on the mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale.

Marital Status: Of the events that occur over one's lifespan the status of having a romantic partner affects the level of loneliness. In college, students have a chance to meet new people and begin romantic relationships. Most students do not get married during college but of those who are, they are less likely to respond negatively to loneliness (Rokach & Brock, 1997). In a study of marriage and loneliness, Stack (1998) explained when analyzing marital status, three conditions link this to well-being: financial satisfaction, better health, and companionship. After controlling financial satisfaction and health, data collected from 17 nations revealed married couples are substantially less lonely than single people. Interestingly, cohabiting partners were also analyzed. The correlation between loneliness and married couples was stronger than in cohabiting partners. In this study, I hypothesized that there is a significant difference between those who are married or with romantic partners and those who are divorced, separated or without romantic partners on the mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale.

loneliness. In one sense loneliness may cause a low grade point average or, a low grade point average can cause loneliness. Rotenburg and Morrison (1993) confirmed the positive relationship between loneliness and dropout rates. They observed, "...the Revised Loneliness Scale scores were *not* appreciably correlated with withdrawing from college because grades were poor." (Rotenburg & Morrison, 1993). In this study I hypothesized that there is a significant difference between those whose grade point average is 3.0 or below and those whose grade point average is 3.1 and above on the mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale.

Race: Race is only one part of a person's outward appearance. But as pointed out in McWhirter's (1997a) pilot study of loneliness and the ethnic minority, Hispanic and African American college students' self-esteem may affect or be affected by loneliness more so than Caucasian college students. His study is consistent with other studies of minorities and loneliness-that students of color report higher levels of loneliness than Caucasian students. The limitation in McWhirter's (1997a) study is his sample is too small to make generalizations. In this study I hypothesize that there is a significant difference between Caucasian students and students with an ethnic background on the mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale.

Other factors that I will take into consideration is an individual's accessibility to someone or something who may provide support during lonely times by owning a car, the awareness of support services on campus, the use of these facilities, one's coping mechanisms, specifically by the measurements of the importance of religious beliefs, and living arrangements.

Taken together, the following are the hypotheses of this study:

1. There is a significant difference between gender on the mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale.
2. There is a significant difference between freshmen, sophomores, and juniors as a group, and seniors and graduate students, as another group, on the mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale.
3. There is a significant difference between those who are married or with romantic partners and those who are divorced, separated or without romantic partners on the mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale.
4. There is a significant difference between those whose grade point average is 3.0 or below and those whose grade point average is 3.1 and above on the mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale.
5. There is a significant difference between those who own a car and those who do not, on the mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale.
6. There is a significant difference between those who are aware of the support services on campus and those who are not on the mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale.
7. There is a significant difference between those who have used at least one of the support services on campus and those who have not on the mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale.

8. There is a significant difference between those who either strongly agree or agree that religion beliefs are very important in their lives and those who either disagree or strongly disagree on the mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale.
9. There is a significant difference between those who live on campus and those who live off campus or commute on the mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale.
10. There is a significant difference between Caucasian students and students with an ethnic background on the mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale.

Method The subjects of this study were 322 students (203 females and 117 males, 2 missing) enrolled at Northern Illinois University, Spring Semester 2002. The subjects were administered the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale within their classrooms. There were 56 African Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders and otherwise unspecified participants, 153 Caucasians participants, and 93 participants who did not specify their race. The year in school of the participants were 213 freshmen, sophomores, and juniors, and 107 seniors and graduate students, 2 participants did not specify their year in college. 141 participants noted they were single, without a romantic relationship, 153 participants noted they were single with a romantic relationship, 19 participants were married, 2 participants were separated, 5 participants were divorced, and 2 did not specify their status. 14 participants indicated a grade point average between 1.1 and 2.0, 150 participants indicated a grade point average between 2.1

and 3.0, 156 participants indicated a grade point average between 3.1 and 4.0, and 2 participants did not indicate a grade point average. Of the 322 participants, 222 participants owned a car, 98 participants did not own a car, and 2 participants did not answer this question. 234 participants indicated they were aware of the support services available on campus. 85 participants were not aware of these services. Three participants did not indicate whether they knew there were support services available on campus. 64 participants have used these at least one of these support services on campus. 255 participants have not used these services and 3 participants did not indicate that they used support services on campus. 235 participants indicated that they "Strongly Agree or Agree" that religious beliefs were important. 81 participants indicated that they "Disagree or Strongly Disagree" about the importance of religious beliefs and 6 participants did not answer this question. 120 participants lived on campus and 197 participants lived off campus and/or commuted to school. Five participants did not indicate where they lived.

Instrument The main research method for this study was survey. Advantages related to survey include economy, the quick turn-around in data collection, the ability to identify attributes of a population from a sample, and to provide information that may be difficult to obtain from other sources (Fowler, 1988).

UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) by Russell (1996) was administered to the students. Each of the 20 items was rated on a 4-point scale ranging from "never (1)" to "always (4)." One dependent variable was created by averaging the scores for all 20 items, with the ten positively phrased items coded in reverse. As such, the higher the mean, the greater the loneliness. Internal consistency (coefficient alpha) ranged from .89 to .94 and

the test-retest reliability coefficient over one year was .73. For this study, the reliability coefficient for all 20 items was .90, indicating a high level of internal consistency.

Results One-way ANOVA revealed the following results:

There is no significant difference between gender, $F(1, 266) = .55, p = .46$. There is no significant difference between students in their junior year and younger and seniors and graduate students on the loneliness mean score, $F(1, 266) = 3.56, p = .06$. However, there is a significant difference between students who are either married or single with romantic partners and students who are divorced, separated, or single without romantic partners, $F(1, 265) = 16.5, p = .000$. The former group reported lower loneliness score than the latter. Grade point average was not a significant factor in this study. Students whose grade point average is 3.0 and below and students whose grade point average is 3.1 and above did not differ significantly on their loneliness mean score, $F(1, 266) = .39, p = .54$. Owning a car was found to be a significant factor. Those with a car reported a significantly lower loneliness score than those without a car, $F(1, 265) = 4.7, p = .03$. Being aware of the support services on campus is not a significant factor, $F(1, 264) = 1.6, p = .2$. Students who have used at least one of these services did not differ significantly than those who have never used the services on campus, $F(1, 264) = 2.23, p = .13$. Religion was not found to be a significant factor either. Those who "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" did not differ from those who "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree" that their religious beliefs were important in their lives $F(1, 262) = .315, p = .575$. Interestingly, those who live on campus did not differ from those who live off campus or commute, $F(1, 264) = .16, p = .69$. Race was found to be a significant factor. Caucasian students reported a lower loneliness score than students

with an ethnic background, $F(1, 228) = 11.43, p=.001$.

Discussion Different from Rotenburg and Morrison (1993) and Wiseman, Guttfreund, and Lurie (1995), gender in this study was not a significant factor. This can result from males and females reporting similar measures of loneliness. As in Wiseman, Guttfreund, and Lurie's (1995) study, students may fail to disclose their loneliness due to the stigma surrounding lonely people or the label of being lonely.

In this study, the year of a student generally reflects the age of the student. This assumption may affect the analysis of these results because not all freshmen and sophomores are 18 or 19 years old. In this study the scores of freshmen, sophomores, and juniors were combined and compared to the scores of seniors and graduate students. Results yielded no significant difference on the mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale between students in their junior year and younger and seniors and graduate students. This is different from some studies such as Rokach (2000) in which young adults ages 19-30 years experienced higher levels of loneliness.

Consistent with studies by Rokach and Brock (1997) and Stack (1998), a person's status is a significant factor in determining the level of loneliness. Married students and those who have romantic partners are less lonely than those who are not married or were married and those who have no romantic partner. Students who are married or who have a romantic partner have someone who may support them during lonely times. In the case of students who were married, support from their partner is no longer available.

Although not much has been documented regarding the grade point average and the level of loneliness, this study suggests it is not a significant factor that affects

loneliness. This is similar to the results in Rotenburg and Morrison's (1993) study in which dropout rates were not correlated to students dropping out because of low grades.

No studies have revealed whether or not having a car affects the level of loneliness one experiences. Northern Illinois University has been coined a "suitcase" school by students because they seem to live out of a suitcase and return to their hometown for the weekends. Many students use their cars to go home to be with family and friends or to be in a less lonely environment. In this study owning a car was positively correlated to lower levels of loneliness. Owning a car or having transportation is a resource for students to cope with their loneliness.

Other resources that may help students cope with their loneliness include their awareness of support services and the use of these services on campus. Research in this area is similar to McWhirter's (1997b) work on resourcefulness and loneliness. In his study learned resourcefulness predicted social loneliness. This means a person's learned resourcefulness predicted how well a person with limited means, was able to develop friendships. Rosenbaum (1983, 1990; as cited in McWhirter, 1997b) defined learned resourcefulness as, "... a collection of well-learned behaviors and cognitive skills that an individual acquires throughout their lives to cope effectively with stressful events and to successfully execute self-control behaviors." In this present study the measurement of awareness and the use of these support services was a method to measure the resourcefulness of an individual. "Behaviors are considered learned resourcefulness skills if (a) they are cued by an internal event and (b) they reduce or eliminate the interfering effects that a negative internal event has on the performance of some target behavior."

(Rosenburg, 1983; as cited in McWhirter, 1997b). The use of support services, such as the Student Development and Counseling Center, is a resourcefulness skill because a student may seek help to cope with loneliness. The students' awareness of the services on campus and the use of at least one of these services did not significantly impact their level of loneliness than those who were not aware of the support services offered on campus and those who have never used these services. A possible reason why this study was not able to support McWhirter's (1997b) results may be because students do not wish to admit they are lonely, especially to personnel who they do not know.

The importance of religious beliefs on the perception of loneliness was measured by the degree of agreement or disagreement of the statement, "My religious beliefs are important in my life." From the results of this study, religious beliefs are not significant in the level of loneliness. This is different from the study by Burris, Batson, Altstaedten, and Stephens (1994), in which their study supported Freud's claim that a person's sense of helplessness motivates them to turn to religion. People who describe their relationship with God as a "secure attachment," were less lonely and depressed than those who describe their relationship with God as an, "insecure attachment." (Kirkpatrick and Shaver, 1992; as cited in Kirkpatrick, Shillito, and Kellas, 1999). Students who believe their religious beliefs are important and their level of loneliness could be likened to those who see their relationship with God as secure. Caution should be taken when measuring how religious beliefs affect loneliness. In this study the correlation between religious beliefs and loneliness is vague and unclear. What should have been asked is whether religious beliefs affect the perception of loneliness or "how has religion helped you to cope with

your loneliness?" In future studies regarding religious beliefs and the level of loneliness, researchers should specify between religious beliefs, spirituality, and religious affiliation.

Whether a student lives on or off campus is important to measure since students living on campus are living away from family. Students off campus and/or commuters may not live with family since students may live with roommates or by themselves in apartments near the university. I hypothesized that there is a significant difference between those who live on campus and those who live off campus or commute on the mean score of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale. In this study there is no significance between the location of residence and loneliness. A reason for this could be students receive support to cope with their loneliness in their living arrangements.

Consistent with McWhirter's (1997a) pilot study of ethnic minorities and loneliness, students with ethnic backgrounds experienced higher levels of loneliness than Caucasians. This may be due to the fact Northern Illinois University's enrollment is predominantly Caucasian and students with ethnic backgrounds may find it difficult to develop friendships with those who are not similar to them.

The results of this study will help implement programs on the NIU campus such as a carpooling service by the Residence Hall Association. Students can become part of a confidential support group to cope with their loneliness. Another program can be a campus-wide event in which all the cultural organizations can participate and students can meet other students and learn about different cultures.

Due to the non-random sampling method for this study generalizations of the results to the larger population of college students is not recommended. Future studies

should involve a larger sample with a more diverse background and possible random sampling.

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