Understanding: The roles of self- and interpersonal dysfunction and early parental indifference

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Introduction

There continues to be growing concern about the "loneliness epidemic". Many factors have been implicated in the development and maintenance of loneliness, including aspects of personality functioning and experience of early adverse childhood events such as parental indifference. Personality factors influence how one may interpret and respond to situations. Clinically lonely individuals have been shown to possess psychological traits that may influence their self-worth and interpersonal functioning. In the context of the five-factor model of personality, loneliness has been found to be associated with higher neuroticism and lower extraversion. Increased neuroticism may distort one’s view of the social world, by highlighting negative experiences while minimizing positive social interaction. The five-factor model is an established means of assessing personality traits and may be used to comprehend loneliness.

The association between parental indifference and loneliness has been found to be moderate, while the association between parental indifference and personality dysfunction is stronger. This study aimed to examine the relationship between domains of personality dysfunction, including both self- and interpersonal dysfunction, and loneliness, and to determine whether such personality traits may moderate the relationship between parental indifference experienced in childhood and loneliness in adulthood.

Hypotheses

1) Loneliness would be positively associated with both self- and interpersonal dysfunction, as well as with history of parental indifference.

2) Self- and interpersonal dysfunction would significantly predict loneliness after controlling for five-factor personality traits.

3) A mediation model was hypothesized in which self- and interpersonal dysfunction would significantly mediate the association between parental indifference and loneliness. The relative strength of each dimension of personality dysfunction would then be examined in an exploratory manner in this parallel mediation model.

Methods

Participants were 393 adults aged 18-59 who were recruited through the Prolific Academic research platform for completion of online study questionnaires facilitated through Qualtrics, for a cross-sectional analysis. The Three-Item Loneliness Scale, developed from the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale was used to assess overall loneliness. This scale is a brief version of the loneliness scale that is widely used and reliable in many settings. The level of loneliness was determined using the Loneliness Scale. Personality Item Pool, gender as denoted female vs. others (male, non-binary and gender queer), and loneliness as measured using the UCLA loneliness scale.

Results

In preliminary modeling, age was included as a variable of interest, however its inclusion was not found to be statistically significant, and so was excluded from the final model. A two-step hierarchical linear regression analysis was performed, where the big five personality traits were included in the first step, and personality function domain measures added in the second step.

Table 1. Zero-order correlations for study variables

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<td>Correlation</td>
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<td>0.293</td>
<td>0.270</td>
<td>0.244</td>
<td>0.288</td>
<td>0.266</td>
<td>0.230</td>
<td>0.237</td>
<td>0.259</td>
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<td>p</td>
<td>0.156</td>
<td>0.105</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>0.038</td>
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In conclusion, loneliness was positively associated with both self- and interpersonal dysfunction and these remained significant predictors of loneliness after controlling for five-factor personality traits. Improved personality functioning accounted for an additional important factor in the prediction of loneliness. Self-dysfunction is a unique mediator of the relationship between childhood parental indifference and loneliness, while interpersonal dysfunction was not. This finding is consistent with those from previous research that has found that self-dysfunction may be more important than interpersonal dysfunction in contributing to loneliness, while controlling for personality traits and self-dysfunction, it appears to be less important in the link between earlier parental indifference and the development of loneliness.

Limitations

1) The cross-sectional nature of this study did not allow to determine whether relationships between our outcomes change over time, or if the strengths of measured associations varied with time.

2) While a causal mediation model was tested, the data present conclusions regarding directionality of relationships over time.

3) Variables were measured using self-report instruments, including personality recall, retrospective recall of parental indifference, which entails potential recall biases.

4) Our sample was relatively homogeneous.

Future Work

1) Longitudinal measurement of early childhood adverse experiences, personality functioning and loneliness to allow for greater understanding of how relationships between these evolve over time.

2) To take ecological momentary sampling approaches to allow for comparison of short-term and chronic experiences of loneliness.

3) To examine parental dysfunction in a cohort of individuals with a more severe degree of loneliness, to determine whether our findings are generalizable to this group.

4) Considering interventions designed to address personality dysfunction when targeting loneliness is critical. Combating loneliness may require addressing self-concept and identity as well as connect concepts about the content of one’s social experiences of emotional neglect and parental indifference.