

A STUDY ON THE LONELINESS LEVEL OF ADOLESCENTS

Figen Gürsoy

fngursoy@yahoo.com

Müdüriye Yıldız Bıçakçı

mudriyebicakci@yahoo.com

Ankara Üniversitesi,
Ev Ekonomisi Yüksekokulu,
Çocuk Gelişimi ve Eğitimi Bölümü
Ankara / TÜRKİYE

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze whether the variables of gender, socioeconomic status, family and friend relationships affect the loneliness levels of adolescents. The study has been conducted with 300 adolescents studying at high schools with different socioeconomic backgrounds in the center of Ankara. The "General Information Form" prepared by the researchers in order to obtain information about the adolescents and their families, and the "UCLA Loneliness Scale" developed by Russell, Peplau & Ferguson (1978) and tested for validity and reliability by Demir (1989) was used in the study. The data obtained has been assessed with "T-test" and "Variance Analysis". The results have showed that socioeconomic status, family and friend relationships cause a significant difference in the loneliness levels of adolescents ($p < .01$) whereas gender does not ($p > .05$).

Key words: Adolescent, loneliness, child development.

ERGENLERİN YALNIZLIK DÜZEYLERİNİN İNCELENMESİ

ÖZET

Araştırmada ergenlerin cinsiyet, sosyoekonomik düzey, aile ve arkadaş ilişkileri değişkenlerinin yalnızlık düzeylerinde farklılık yaratıp yaratmadığının belirlenmesi amaçlanmıştır. Araştırma Ankara il merkezindeki bulunan farklı sosyoekonomik düzeyde bulunan liselere devam eden toplam 300 ergen üzerinde yürütülmüştür. Araştırmada ergenlerin kendileri ve aileleri ile ilgili bilgileri elde etmek için araştırmacılar tarafından hazırlanan "Genel Bilgi Formu" ile ergenlerin yalnızlık düzeylerini belirlemek amacıyla Russell, Peplau & Ferguson (1978) tarafından geliştirilen Demir (1989) tarafından geçerlik ve güvenirlik çalışması yapılan "UCLA Yalnızlık Ölçeği" kullanılmıştır. Araştırmadan elde edilen veriler "t-Testi" ve "Varyans Analizi" ile değerlendirilmiştir. Araştırma sonucunda ergenlerin sosyo ekonomik düzeyinin, arkadaş ve aile ilişkilerinin yalnızlık düzeylerinde anlamlı bir farklılık yarattığı belirlenirken ($p < .01$) cinsiyetin yalnızlık düzeylerinde önemli olmadığı saptanmıştır ($p > .05$).

Anahtar kelimeler: Ergen, yalnızlık, çocuk gelişimi.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a transitional period involving many biological, psychological, mental and social developments and changes (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman,

Flanagan, & MacIver, 1993). This period initially starts with sudden physical development and change, followed by psychological and social changes. The earliest changes include psychological changes caused directly or indirectly by physical

changes (Köknel, 1999). While undergoing these changes, adolescents seek the answer to the question "Who am I?" and strive to find out how their emotions, thoughts and behaviour differ from that of their parents, what different values they hold to those of their family, how other people view them and how they view other people in return. Owing to these thoughts, adolescents need to make a huge effort to accept who they are, find themselves, make new friends and reach their aims (Nelsen & Lott, 2001). Owing again to these psychological changes, happy, harmonious, balanced children turn into worried, anxious, unstable, and unfit adolescents. This period of struggle and indecisiveness changes their emotions and interests and, as a result, they swing between careless, limitless and unbalanced excitements (Köknel, 1999). The resulting tension makes adolescents depressed and lonely. Suffocated by the pessimism, restlessness and distress of this period, adolescents desperately need the security of a comforting environment (Kulaksızoğlu, 2001). The lack of such an environment may instil a feeling of loneliness in adolescents, thus causing an adverse effect on their socialization.

Loneliness results from a mismatch between an individual's existing social relationships and what they view as ideal, which leads to a psychologically uncomfortable situation (Ponzetti, 1990). Effective especially on social and emotional development (Weiss, 1973), loneliness is a common emotion in adolescence and early adulthood. The most important reason for loneliness during adolescence is failure to maintain friend relationships. Other reasons include lower socio-economic level (Woodward & Kalyan Masih, 1990) distant family relationships, poor social relationships, (Nurmi, Toivonen, Salmela-Aro, & Eronen 1997; Buchholz & Catton, 1999; Mcwhirter, Besett-Alesch, Horibata, & Gat, 2002) low self-esteem, (Rubin & Mills, 1991; Cash, 1995) adverse school environment and adolescence-

related problems such as depression or eating disorders (Nurmi, Toivonen, Salmela-Aro, & Eronen 1997; Buchholz & Catton, 1999; Mcwhirter, Besett-Alesch, Horibata, & Gat, 2002). To illustrate, while Sergin, Powell, Givertz & Brackin (2003) have showed that loneliness is related to an individual's relationship with the surrounding environment and the quality of these relationships, van Buskirk & Duke (1991) have maintained that loneliness is determined by friend, family and social relationships, as well as the individual characteristic features of adolescents.

People who have difficulty coping with the strains of adolescence may have a pressing need for an understanding and supportive family. By having an adverse effect on social and emotional development, deficient family relationships may push adolescents into loneliness. Deficient family relationships during childhood may have even a worse effect (Alonzo, 1989). When an individual has emotional problems within the family, these tend to continue into adolescence and make the individual feel even lonelier. Therefore, it may be argued that family relationships and parental education level greatly affect the loneliness level of adolescents. If the parents have low educational background, adolescents may undergo adjustment difficulties and emotional problems, and thus start to feel lonelier. Similar to family relationships, friend relationships may also affect the feeling of loneliness, though at a different level (Terrell-Deutsch, 1999). Adolescents who make close friends within their peer group and larger groups develop a sense of independence and a positive personality (Giordano, 1995) thus lessening the feeling of loneliness. In adolescence, joining a circle of friends and getting accepted by peers becomes very important (Kulaksızoğlu, 2001). Therefore, it is believed that friend relationships may be more influential on loneliness. Uruk & Demir (2003), in their study about the role of family and friend relationships on adolescents' level

of loneliness, have concluded that friend relationships have a significant effect. Sing Lau, Dennis & Patrick (1999) have found in their study that loneliness leads to depression and friend relationships influence loneliness more than family relationships do. In addition, the socio-economic level of the family also affects the feeling of loneliness. Gürsoy & Yıldız Bıçakçı (2003) have mentioned the role of socio-economic status on adolescent loneliness. In addition to these factors, numerous loneliness-related studies have also investigated the role of gender as a variable that affects loneliness levels. While some studies report that girls feel more loneliness (Kutlu 2003), others have concluded that boys feel it more often (Engin Deniz & Hamarta 2003).

Taking these as a starting point, the present study aims to investigate whether gender, socio-economic level, friend and family relationships affect adolescents' level of loneliness.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim of the study is to identify whether gender, socio-economic level, friend and family relationships make a difference in the loneliness levels of adolescents. The study has been conducted with 300 adolescents enrolled in high schools from different socio-economic backgrounds in the center of Ankara. The "General Information Form" prepared by the researchers was used to obtain information about the adolescents and their families, and the "UCLA Loneliness Scale" developed by Russell, Peplau & Ferguson (1978) and tested for validity and reliability by Demir (1989) was used to identify their loneliness levels. UCLA Loneliness Scale is a four-item Likert scale consisting of 20 statements about emotions and thoughts in social relationships, 10 of which have been coded positively and the remaining 10 negatively. The points that each individual obtains on each item are added up to determine a "general loneliness

point average". The maximum point possible is 80, whereas the minimum is 20. Obtaining a high point on the scale is accepted as an indicator of a high level of loneliness in the individual (Demir, 1989).

Further, "T-test" has been used to determine whether gender has an effect on loneliness and "Variance Analysis" has been used to identify the effects of socio-economic level, family and friend relationships on loneliness levels. Following this, the "Scheffe Test" was conducted to find the outlier groups (Büyüköztürk, 2002).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Of all the adolescents who participated in the study, 22% were 15 years old, 39% were 16, 35% were 17 and 4% were 18. When parental education level was considered, it was seen that among the mothers, 41% were primary school graduates, 35% high school graduates, and 24% university graduates. Among the fathers, 33% consisted of primary school graduates, 38% of high school graduates, and 29% of university graduates. The data about the adolescents in the study have been analyzed, presented in tables, and discussed in relation to the relevant literature in the remaining sections of this article.

Table 1. The loneliness point averages, standard deviations and t-test results of subjects by gender

Gender	n	\bar{X}	S	sd	t	p
<i>Female</i>	150	47.0	5.40	298	1.83	.06
<i>Male</i>	150	45.8	5.81			

As can be seen from Table 1, although the t-test results did not yield a meaningful difference between the loneliness point averages of the two genders [$t_{(298)}=1.83$, $p>.05$], it was seen that the averages of male adolescents ($\bar{X} = 45.82$) was lower than that of female adolescents ($\bar{X} = 47.01$). A lower average shows less loneliness. The reason why male adolescents feel less lonely may be because they participate

more frequently in social and sports activities and therefore socialize more. On the other hand, more parental pressure on female adolescents may make girls intraverted and thus intensify their feeling of loneliness. Additionally, female adolescents usually choose to talk with their peers as a strategy to overcome difficulties, which makes them focus more on problems and thus prone to an intensified feeling of loneliness. Studies have shown that spending more time with female adolescents makes both girls and boys more lonely (Wheeler, Reis, & Nezelek, 1983). In their comparative study of two different cultures, DiTommaso, Brannen & Burgess (2005) have also concluded that female students feel more lonely. However, there are some other studies in the literature which argue that boys feel more lonely when compared to girls (Schultz & Moore, 1986; Lufting, 1987; Gürsoy & Yıldız Bıçakçı, 2003).

Table 2. The loneliness point averages, standard deviations and variance analysis results of subjects by socio-economic level (SEL)

SEL	n	LEVEL OF LONELINESS			
Lower	100	47.27 ± 5.21			
Middle	100	47.22 ± 5.23			
Upper	100	44.86 ± 6.12			
General	300	45.80 ± 5.32			
Variance Analysis Results	SD	Mean Square	F	P	Meaningful Difference
Between	2	184.21	5.99*	.00	1-2
Within	297	30.70			1-3
TOTAL	299				

P**<.01

Table 2 shows that the loneliness point averages of adolescents at the lower socio-economic level is 47.27 ± 5.21, at the middle level 47.22 ± 5.23, and at the upper level 44.86 ± 6.12. Variance analysis has shown that a meaningful difference exists between the adolescents' point averages with respect to socio-economic level ($F_{2-297} = 5.99$, $p < .01$). The Scheffe test results point to the adolescents

from the lower socio-economic level as the outliers.

This may be because lower socio-economic level adolescents can spend only limited time socializing with their peers due to economic problems and thus spend more time on their own, rather than with their friends. Woodward & Kalyan Masih (1990), in a study which focused on the loneliness levels of talented rural adolescents, concluded that socio-economic level was more influential on the loneliness levels of these subjects than other adolescent groups. Demir & Tarhan (2001), in their study about the loneliness levels of Turkish adolescents, emphasized that the social environment in which adolescents live is an influential determinant of loneliness.

Table 3. The loneliness point averages, standard deviations and variance analysis results of subjects by family relationships

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS	n	LEVEL OF LONELINESS			
My family do not have enough time for me; therefore, we do not share much.	72	48.18 ± 4.65			
I can only discuss certain things with my family.	93	46.40 ± 5.06			
I have good relations with my family; I know that I am important to them.	135	45.83 ± 5.68			
GENERAL	300	46.57 ± 5.32			
Variance Analysis Results	Sd	Mean Square	F	P	Meaningful Difference
Between Groups	2	130.84	4.72*	.01	1-2
Within Groups	297	27.68			1-3
TOTAL	299				

P**<.01

Table 3 shows that the adolescents whose family do not have enough time for them and who cannot share much with their family have a loneliness point average of 48.18 ± 4.65 , those who say they can only discuss certain issues with family have an average of 46.40 ± 5.06 , and those who are content with their family relationships have an average of 45.83 ± 5.68 . The variance analysis yielded a meaningful difference between loneliness point averages with respect to family relationships ($F_{2-297} = 4.72$, $p < .01$). The Scheffe test has shown that the outlier group is those who say their family do not have enough time for them.

Adolescence is one of the most difficult periods in human life and distant family relationships further worsen these difficulties. A good relationship within the family and strong parental support are crucial to the well-being of an adolescent. Distant family relationships and inability to discuss problems within the family may lead to loneliness on the adolescents' part. Naturally, the education level of parents is important in the relationship that the family will have with adolescents. As people's education level increases, so does their knowledge of child development and ways of dealing with adolescents (Gürsoy & Yıldız Bıçakçı 2003). Wilson, Sibanda, Sibanda & Wilson (1989) have shown in a study with white and black adolescents, and Rokach & Neto (2000) have shown in a study with adolescents from different cultures (Canada and Portugal) that culture level has a role in the loneliness levels of adolescents. Similarly, DiTommaso, Brannen & Burgess (2005) have shown that culture level is influential in the loneliness levels of university students. In addition, Sing Lau, Dennis & Patrick (1999) and Richaud de Minzi & Sacchi (2004) concluded that family relationships and family structure affect adolescents' feeling of loneliness.

Table 4. The loneliness point averages, standard deviations and variance analysis results of subjects by friend relationships

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS	n	LEVEL OF LONELINESS			
I do not like socializing with friends; I only do it out of obligation.	64	48.60 ± 4.50			
I sometimes have a good time with friends.	98	46.28 ± 5.12			
I like socializing and sharing with my friends.	138	45.92 ± 5.62			
GENERAL	300	46.61 ± 5.33			
Variance Analysis Results	SD	Mean Square	F	P	Meaningful Difference
Between groups	2	130.84	4.72*	.01	1-2
Within groups	297	27.68			1-3
TOTAL	299				

$P^{**} < .01$

As can be seen from Table 4, the loneliness point averages of adolescents who do not like to socialize with their peers is 48.60 ± 4.50 , those who say they sometimes enjoy it is 46.28 ± 5.12 , and those who say they like socializing is 45.92 ± 5.33 . The variance analysis has shown that there is a meaningful difference between point averages when friend relationships are considered ($F_{2-297} = 6.03$, $p < .01$). The Scheffe test identified the outlier group to be the ones who said they did not enjoy their friends' company.

Intraversion during adolescence may create worries, a poor self-image, intensified loneliness (Wilson, Sibanda, Sibanda, & Wilson; 1989) and thus lead to broken friendships, or worse, total rejection from a peer group. Further, it

may cause adolescents to connect with similarly intraverted and worried friends who also have low self-esteem. This may prevent adolescents from socializing and exacerbate their feeling of loneliness. Studies in the literature maintain that intraverted friends intensify adolescents' loneliness levels (Ponzeetti, 1990). In contrast, good friendships and peer group acceptance eases adolescents' self-acceptance process and lessens their loneliness (Richaud de Minzi & Sacchi, 2004). In their study about children's friendships, integration with peer group and level of loneliness, Parker & Asher (1993) found that highly accepted children have good friends, and that factors such as having close friends, the quality of these friendships and peer group acceptance lessen loneliness. Numerous other studies have also concluded that family relationships, friendships and relationships with the opposite sex affect adolescents' level of loneliness (DiTommaso, Brannen & Burgess, 2005; Sam, 2001, Ward & Kennedy, 1993).

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The aim of the present study has been to determine whether adolescents' gender, socio-economic level, friendships and family relationships make a difference in their levels of loneliness. The results have shown that while socio-economic level, friendships and family relationships cause a meaningful difference in loneliness levels ($p < .01$), gender does not ($p > .05$).

Adolescence is one of the fastest-developing and most difficult periods in human life. During this period, adolescents must undergo rather confusing emotions and thoughts. Their psychological well-being is affected either positively or negatively by family relationships, peer group environment and financial difficulties. This consequently lessens or intensifies their loneliness. Therefore, the relationships that families establish with adolescents and the value they place on them

is crucially important. Families need to listen to and connect with adolescents and accept them as individuals. Additionally, it is imperative that educators at schools understand the demands of dealing with adolescents and work towards lessening their levels of loneliness. Moreover, families should plan collective and individual activities for adolescents, while educators should increase the counselling hours at schools and encourage adolescents to participate in cultural, artistic and sports activities in order to make good use of their spare time. These precautions would ease the strains of adolescence for adolescents, families and the society alike, and lessen the feelings of loneliness in this difficult period.

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