Adolescent Loneliness: 
A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Americans and Asian Indians*

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ABSTRACT

The experience of loneliness for adolescents in the American and Asian Indian cultures was compared. The subjects for the study were 94 American college students and 104 Indian college students. Both samples completed the Loneliness Inventory, a demographic questionnaire, and rated their ease in making friends and degree of family closeness. Female American adolescents were significantly lonelier than female Indian adolescents. There was no significant difference between the loneliness scores of the Indian versus the American male adolescents. American females were found to be lonelier than American males. There were significant effects of ordinal position and family closeness on Indian adolescent loneliness scores. Ease in making friends was significantly related to loneliness scores for both samples. Loneliness scores were not significantly affected by socioeconomic status, religiosity, number of siblings, and number of close friends for either sample.

There is a consensus among social scientists that all individuals will experience loneliness at some point in their lives. Loneliness occurs without regard for age, sex, social class, level of education, or marital status (Fromm, 1965; Tanner, 1960; Tournier, 1961). Rubin (1971) noted that even those individuals who have good interpersonal relationships, devoted and loving families, satisfying careers, and busy social lives experience loneliness at some point in their life cycles.

Loneliness is especially common among adolescents. Erikson (1968) and Waterman and Waterman (1971) describe adolescence as a period of experiencing insecurity, self-doubt, and the search for one's identity. The inadequacies and insecurities experienced during adolescence increase the chances that the adolescent will experience loneliness. If adolescents are helped to feel secure and positive about themselves, loneliness may be experienced to a lesser degree.

Gaev (1976) emphasizes that peer groups play a crucial role in the avoidance or occurrence of loneliness. She maintains that social isolation and loneliness, caused by peer group rejection during the early or late adolescent stage, can prove detrimental and irreversible.

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Loneliness and Culture

Among the important factors affecting the individual's experience of loneliness are the culture and the family in which he/she develops. There is, however, only one study in the research literature on loneliness from a cross-cultural perspective. Ostrov and Offer (1980) studied loneliness in adolescents from three countries: America, Australia, and Ireland. They reasoned that American culture stresses individual achievement and competitive, impersonal social relations which make alliances with others difficult for adolescents. The mobility of adolescents in America also encourages alienation from family and friends. Hence, they hypothesized that American adolescents would report more frequent loneliness when compared to Australian or Irish adolescents who lived in more traditional, less industrialized, and less mobile and competitive societies. The results of their study show that young American teenage boys (ages 12-16) more frequently indicated they were lonely than their Australian or Irish counterparts. In contrast, no significant differences were found between the adolescent girls from the three cultures.

Saxton (1986) emphasizes that in contemporary American society an individual may experience loneliness because of a decline in primary group contacts. Primary group contacts are face-to-face, intimate contacts with family members, relatives, and close friends. The reasons for this decline in primary group contacts include working mothers, smaller families, and the age grouping of adults and children outside the home.

Residential mobility is another factor related to loneliness in the American culture (Packard, 1972; Walker, 1966). Residential mobility causes people to remain uninvolved in their present social groups because they are aware they will move to another place soon.

Another contributing factor is the decline in neighborhood contacts which occur in large metropolitan cities. Factors such as large apartment complexes, social prejudice, and fear of crime prevent many people from interacting with each other.

In the American nuclear family the individual tends to be more important than the group. Hence, individuals who grow up in a nuclear family with its relatively small number of family members, high mobility, and emphasis on autonomy, may be prone to experience loneliness (Peplau and Perlman, 1982).

In contrast, individuals raised in a larger, extended family that values the group over the individual, is less mobile, and emphasizes self-sacrifice for the sake of the group is less likely to experience loneliness. This type of extended family is found in India. It is called the "joint family." According to Karve (1953), "a joint family is a group of people who generally live under one roof, who eat the same food cooked at one hearth, who hold property in common and who participate in common family worship, and are related to each other as some particular type of kindred" (p. 141-142). Agarwala (1956) included the dimension of authority in his definition of the joint family. He emphasized that members of the joint family are under the authority of the elder male in matters of family and religion, joint investment of capital, joint enjoyment of profits and the incurring of birth, marriage, and death expenses from the joint funds.

The Indian culture is notably different from the American culture in several other important ways. The most obvious difference is that the Indian culture is more family-oriented while the American culture is more individual-oriented (Kakar, 1981; Reddy and Bhat, 1971). Another difference is that the Indian culture is more philosophically-oriented and does not put much emphasis on individual achievement and worldly suc-