Loneliness and self-esteem in late adolescence: Cross-lagged effects and the mediating role of social acceptance
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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Developmental tasks adolescence
- Establishing a solid sense of self
- Establishing mature peer relationships

However, these developmental tasks are not easily accomplished by every adolescent. A lack of close and meaningful peer relationships may result in feelings of loneliness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and difficulties in establishing a solid sense of self is linked to lower self-esteem (Marcia et al., 1993).

Loneliness = negative emotion that comes about through a discrepancy between desired and achieved levels of social contact

Self-Esteem = self-evaluation that expresses a judgment of approval, disapproval, and personal worth

Loneliness and low self-esteem

Cross-sectional highly correlated: -0.42 to -0.54 (Macon et al., 2008).

Theoretical assumptions that both are also longitudinally correlated: Sociometer theory (Leary et al., 1995):
- Self-esteem functions as a ‘sociometer’ that monitors the quality of one’s relationships.
- Self-esteem is assumed to be an internal, subjective marker of the degree to which the individual is being included versus excluded by other people.
- Indications that one is likely to fulfill the need to belong will increase self-esteem, whereas indications that one is likely to be frustrated in the need to belong (and experience feelings of loneliness) will decrease self-esteem.

→ The development of self-esteem and loneliness are expected to be related.
→ However: unclear how their prospective effects are over time, and what can explain their effects on each other.

Study 1: Direction of effects?
Study 2: Mediating mechanisms?

STUDY 1: DIRECTION OF EFFECTS

Introduction
Several theoretical plausible mechanisms:
- Vulnerability model: low self-esteem gives rise to loneliness
- Scar model: loneliness gives rise to low self-esteem
- Reciprocal model: loneliness and low self-esteem influence each other across time

Empirical support for the three possibilities, with most research done about the scar model (in line with the sociometer theory).

Method
413 Dutch 15-year-olds (47 % females) from the ‘Family and Health’ project filled out a questionnaire packet on an annual basis during 5 years. This packet included the peer-related loneliness scale of the Loneliness and Abandonment Scale for Children and Adolescents (LACA) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

Results
High stability coefficients for self-esteem (.61 to .69) and loneliness (.61 to .66).
High within-time correlations: range from -.39 to -.53.
Girls experienced more loneliness and had lower self-esteem than boys at all measurement waves.

Final cross-lagged model (with non-significant paths not represented):
- Good model fit: χ² (26) = 116.67***; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .03
- No gender differences (multi-group)

Conclusions
Reciprocal effects over time
Self-esteem predicted loneliness consistently, whereas loneliness predicted self-esteem less consistently, which means that there is stronger evidence for the vulnerability model than for the scar model.

Another way of looking at the data: transactional chain.
Correlated change: the longitudinal course of loneliness and self-esteem are correlated over time: decreases (or increases) in loneliness go along with increases (or decreases) in self-esteem, and vice versa.

STUDY 2: MEDIATING ROLE OF SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE

Introduction
Study 1 showed that low self-esteem is a consistent predictor of loneliness across time. A question yet to be answered is why people with lower self-esteem develop feelings of loneliness.

Low self-esteem may color adolescents’ perceptions of others’ reactions. For example, previous research showed that adolescents with low self-esteem – as compared to adolescents with high self-esteem – are more likely to perceive other people’s reactions as rejecting, have less confidence that their romantic partner loves them and regards them positively, and anticipate less acceptance from novel interaction partners.

In sum, several studies suggest that low self-esteem may give people the impression that they are not accepted by their social environment, which, in turn, can result in feelings of loneliness. Therefore, in Study 2, we examined the role of perceived social acceptance as a mediator in the association between self-esteem and loneliness.

Method
943 Belgian adolescents (age 15-18; 66 % females) completed the peer-related loneliness scale of the LACA, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and the Social Acceptance subscale of the Harter Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents.

Results
High correlation between self-esteem and loneliness: -.51.
Boys reported a higher self-esteem and a higher perceived social acceptance than girls; no gender differences in loneliness.

Final partial mediation model:
- 43% from the original path was explained after entering the mediator

Conclusions
Perceived social acceptance functioned as a partial mediator between self-esteem and loneliness.

Our results suggest that adolescents with lower self-esteem often get the feeling that they are not accepted by their peers, which in turn can lead to feelings of loneliness.

REFERENCES


