LONELINESS IN NORTH AMERICA AND SPAIN

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The present study examined the influence of cultural background on the experience of loneliness. Six hundred and thirty-seven participants from North America and 454 from Spain volunteered to answer an 82-item questionnaire which examined the quality of their loneliness experiences. The factors which comprise the experience of loneliness are Emotional distress, Social inadequacy and alienation, Growth and discovery, Interpersonal isolation, and Self-alienation. Results indicated that cultural background, indeed, affects the experience of loneliness. North Americans scored higher on all five factors, and a similar trend was evident when men and women were compared across cultures.

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Current research points out the pervasiveness of loneliness and its debilitating effects (Jones, Rose & Russell, 1990; Rokach & Brock, 1997). As Sadler (1987) observed “many of us in today’s world are living on the verge of a lonely life. A significant number of us have experienced the ravages of loneliness; some of us have become debilitated, depressed and demoralized by it” (p. 184). Hsu, Hailey, and Range (1987) asserted that, for the majority of people, loneliness may be only momentary. But for a significant number it is a constant and serious problem.

Lonely individuals tend to score high on negative intrapersonal traits like pessimism (Davis, Hanson, Edson & Ziegler, 1992; Ernst & Cacioppo, 1998). Loneliness is also strongly negatively correlated with happiness (Booth, Bartlett, & Bohansock, 1992) and life satisfaction (Riggio, Watring & Throckmorton, 1993). Loneliness has been linked to such maladies as depression, suicide, hostility, alcoholism, poor self-concept, and psychosomatic illnesses (McWhirter, 1990).

Shweder and Sullivan (1993) and Doherty, Hatfield, Thompson, and Choo (1994) asserted that researchers must take cultural and ethnic differences into account when designing research if the commonality and differences between people are to be truly understood.

Although most loneliness research has been conducted in industrialized nations (Bohgle, 1991) it is clear that the negative implications of loneliness are felt regardless of the culture in which it occurs. Wilson, Sibanda, Sibanda and Wilson (1989) asserted that little cross-cultural research on loneliness exists, while Ginter, Glauser and Richmond (1994) pointed out the importance of urgency for cross-cultural research. It is conceivable, then, that the differences amongst cultures and the way people’s social relations are organized within them will result in cross-cultural variations in the way people experience and cope with loneliness (Medora, Woodward, & Larson, 1987). The present study focussed on the loneliness of people in two diverse cultures: the North American one (as exemplified in this case by the Canadian participants) and the Spanish. These two cultures differ geographically, religiously, economically, and socially.

The North American Culture

It has been frequently pointed out (Sermat, 1980; Schneider, 1998) that loneliness is prevalent in, and may even be encouraged by, the North American culture. Ostrov and Offer (1980) had reasoned that the North American culture emphasizes individual achievement, competitiveness, and impersonal social relating. Consequently, loneliness may be quite pronounced in the face of such socially alienating values. Saxton (1986) argued that, in contemporary North American society, there is a decline in the primary group contacts. Those are the face-to-face, intimate contacts with family members, relatives, and close friends which were much more prevalent several decades ago. Packard (1972) and Walker (1966) pointed to residential mobility as enhancing loneliness in North America by causing people to
remain uninvolved in their social groups due to their acute awareness of an impending move. In addition, large metropolitan areas, with their large apartment complexes, social prejudice and fear of crime, add to people's reluctance to interact and get involved with each other (Medora, Woodward, & Larson, 1987).

Schneider (1998), in discussing psychological well-being, noted that the North American culture does not contribute to symptom reduction and personal adjustment as criteria for psychological wellness (Breggin, 1991). Coupled with increased computerization and Internet use, the North American culture magnifies the individual's social alienation, limited contact with others (within and without one's family), and loneliness (Kraut et al., 1998). Since the American and the Canadian cultures share a common language, geographical proximity, a flow of visitors, commercial interconnections and economical alliances, the Canadian sample will be examined as part of the North American culture.

**The Spanish Culture**

Spain is one of the largest countries in Europe, with nearly 40 million inhabitants. It lies in the south-western tip of Europe, and is considered one of the countries which shares the Mediterranean culture (World Book Encyclopedia, 1999). Prior to the 1960's economic development, most Spaniards were poor, lived in rural villages and owned small farms. Today, Spain is an industrial nation and its citizens live in an increasingly modern urban society (Reay-Smith, 1990). From a land of deep-rooted traditions and long-established customs where strictly conventional behaviors were the norm, Spain today closely resembles its European counterparts (Graff, 1993).

For centuries, regionalism and Roman Catholicism were important forces in Spanish life (Reay-Smith, 1990). About 95% of the population is Roman Catholic (World Book Encyclopedia, 1999). However, rapid economic and social changes have reduced the influence of these forces on many of the people (World Book Encyclopedia, 1999). Thus, although in 1970, 87% of Spaniards consider themselves to be good religious observers, in 1991 this percentage went down to 49% (DeMiguel, 1997).

Spain has been described in the anthropological literature as an "honor culture" and one in which masculine and feminine sex roles are deeply entrenched (Gilmore & Gwynne, 1985; Pitt-Rivers, 1977). The masculine sex role entails values that are relevant for the protection of the family's honor, and the feminine "honor code" centers on values that emphasize the importance of virginity and chastity (Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead & Fischer, in press). The family is a pillar of Spanish society and loyalty to one's family is undoubted (Reay-Smith, 1990). Nevertheless, although traditional sex roles prevail, sexism in Spain is not unlike that found in many European countries (Glick et al., in press). While the North American culture has repeatedly been characterized as an individualistic culture, in which peo-
ple are encouraged to value personal independence, self-fulfilment, and achievement (e.g., Triandis, 1995), Spanish university students were found to be more collectivistic in their orientations (Morales, Lopez & Vega, 1992). Hofstede (1980, 1991) in his study of 53 nations, found indexes of individualism of 91 for the United States (ranked in the first position), 80 for Canada (4th position) and 51 for Spain (20th position).

In Spain, family and social relationships are very important, both quantitatively and qualitatively. According to research by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociologicas (Sociological Research Institute in Spain) 1995, Spaniards and Swedish are the Europeans who dedicate the highest number of hours to social relationships and to contacts with friends (2½ hours per day); whereas the European average is 15 minutes. Similarly, there are 133,000 bars (pubs, cafeterias, etc.) in Spain, more than in all the countries of the European Union together, a sign of the importance of social interaction for Spaniards.

Concerning the quality of their relationships, family ties are highly important for Spaniards, followed by work and friends (CIS, 1995); the divorce rate among the Spanish population is the lowest in Europe. Spain is the only European country whose citizens reported an increase in their level of satisfaction and happiness from 1985 to 1990. In the CIS research (1995), when participants were asked about how satisfied they were with their intimate relationships, 93% answered “very satisfied, or satisfied”.

Loneliness research tends to focus on individual factors — that is, either on personality factors or on lack of social contacts (Jylha & Jokela, 1990). However, loneliness could be expressive of the individual’s relationship to the community. It is conceivable, then, that the differences amongst cultures and the manner in which people’s social relations are organized within them will result in cross-cultural variations in the way people experience loneliness. The differences in social tapestry, interpersonal interaction, and the support networks which are available to individuals in various regions are, naturally, bound to affect the experience of loneliness as outlined by Rokach and Brock (1997). The present study, then, aimed at examining the qualitative aspects of loneliness of populations with differing cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, norms and values.

**METHOD**

**PARTICIPANTS**

One thousand and ninety-three participants were invited, on a voluntary basis, to answer the loneliness questionnaire. In an attempt to overcome the methodological difficulty of other studies that relied solely on college students (see Vincenzi & Grabosky, 1987; Eysenck, 1995), the participants in the present study were recruited from all walks of life. In Canada, the 637 participants were recruited in
community centers, colleges, special interest groups and homes for the aged. The 454 Spanish participants were recruited by volunteer Psychology students. Questionnaires were enclosed in envelopes and were given personally to each participant. Anonymity was guaranteed. After the participants had filled out the questionnaires, they inserted them into envelopes and left them in a specific place, where the student later picked them up. In some cases (especially with older people), the student read the questions to them. Some participants were students' relatives or friends and others were recruited in community centers, colleges, secondary schools, and day-care centers for the aged. The questionnaire which was administered in Spain was translated by the two Spanish authors. A first translation was piloted on a small group of students and on a group of people with different socio-demographic characteristics (similar to those of the general sample studied), who indicated the parts which were difficult to understand or misleading. These were corrected in subsequent revisions.

**DEMOGRAPHICS**

The average age of the 1093 participants was 33.4 years (range: 16-65) and the mean education was 12.04 years (range: 1-22). Five hundred and eighty-two participants (53.5%) were single, 353 (32%) were married, and 152 (14%) were separated, divorced or widowed. Table 1 outlines the breakdown of gender, age, marital status and educational level within each culture.

**THE LONELINESS QUESTIONNAIRE**

All items for the questionnaire were written by one of the senior authors and based on Rokach's previous research on loneliness (Rokach, 1988). The study yielded a theoretical model of loneliness as reported by 526 subjects who were asked to describe their experience of loneliness.

Principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was applied to the data with .40 being designated as the minimum loading for an item. The factor analytic procedure, using an SPSS program, extracted the principal components, and the factor matrix was then subjected to varimax rotation. The items contributing to the factors could be assigned meaning, and each accounted for sufficient amount of the variance (at least 3%) to support statistical meaningfulness. The remaining factors accounted for one or two percent of the variance and so were ignored. Accordingly, repetitions of the varimax rotations were limited to five factors each to permit the results to be restricted to the most robust factors.

All 82 items in the questionnaire were derived from Rokach and Brock (1997) who had factor analyzed participants' descriptions of their loneliness experience. That analysis yielded five factors of which the most salient factor to emerge was Emotional distress (which accounted for 19% of the variance). This included items that captured the intense pain, inner turmoil, hopelessness, and feelings of empti-
ness associated with loneliness. The second factor, Social inadequacy and alienation (7% of the variance) addressed the perception and concomitant self-generated social detachment which were reported as part of the loneliness experience. The third factor, Growth and discovery (4% of the variance) captured the positive, growth-enhancing, and enriching aspects of loneliness and increased feelings of inner strength and self-reliance which follow. Interpersonal isolation (3% of the variance) was the fourth factor. It depicted feelings of alienation, abandonment, and rejection, which were reported as related to a general lack of a close relationship and/or absence of a primary romantic relationship. The fifth factor, Self-alienation (3% of the variance) described a detachment from one’s self that is characterized by numbness, immobility, and denial. In all, these factors accounted for 36% of the variance. Each factor was a subscale whose score was the sum of the items which were endorsed (see Appendix A for sample items). Kuder-Richardson internal consistency reliabilities were calculated and yielded the following alpha values: $F_1 = .93$; $F_2 = .93$; $F_3 = .92$; $F_4 = .93$; $F_5 = .87$. K-R alpha for the 82 item questionnaire was .91.

The present study took the position that, in the light of the world’s interconnectedness (Hermans & Kempen, 1998), the same questionnaire which was employed in North America would be suitable, understood by and apply to the Spanish population. The questionnaire which was administered in Spain was translated and later edited for clarity and accuracy of content and meaning.

RESULTS

Results of the present study confirm the hypothesis that cultural background is significantly related to the manner in which loneliness is experienced. Results indicated that in each of the five subscales, North Americans scored significantly higher than did the Spanish sample.

Table 1 outlines the breakdown of gender, marital status, educational level, and age. A sex by culture Chi-square analysis ($X^2_{(1,100)} = 64.43; p<.001$) yielded significant differences in gender scores amongst the two cultures. One way ANOVAs found age ($F_{(1,1091)} = 4.86; p<.05$) and education ($F_{(1,1007)} = 5.75; p<.05$) to be significantly different amongst the two cultures. Marital status ($X^2_{(1,3)} = 88.22; p<.001$) also differed significantly amongst cultures with the unmarried being almost doubled in the Spanish sample, while those who used to be married, but who no longer had a partner ("divorced") due to death, separation, or divorce were four times as high in the Canadian sample.
## TABLE 1
### DEMOGRAPHICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>N(^1)</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>639</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(54%)</td>
<td>(24%)</td>
<td>(22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>469</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(50%)</td>
<td>(45%)</td>
<td>(5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X(_{1,2})^2(^{1}) = 1.31</td>
<td>F(_{1,405}) = .88</td>
<td>F(_{1,451}) = .78</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1093</td>
<td>582</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X(_{1,3})^2(^{1}) = 88.22</td>
<td>F(_{1,1000}) = 53.67(^{**})</td>
<td>F(_{1,1091}) = 4.86(^{**})</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) N’s and percentages may not add up due to missing data.
\(^2\) in parentheses = range
\(^*\) p < .05 \(^**\) p < .001

Table 2 compared the mean subscale scores on each of the five factors amongst the two cultural groups using a MANCOVA (gender and marital status covaried). The MANCOVA (F\(_{5,832}\) = 127.26; p < .001) was significant and, consequently, univariate ANCOVAs for each of the subscales across cultures were conducted (marital status, education and gender were covaried).

Results of the present study indicated that Canadians differed significantly on all their subscale scores from Spaniards, who scored significantly lower. Analyses were conducted also to examine the experience of loneliness of each gender across cultures. MANCOVAs comparing mean subscales of males across the two cultures were significant (F\(_{5,517}\) = 84.13; p < .001) and a significant difference (F\(_{5,183}\) = 36.57; p < .001) was found also between females across cultures. Univariate ANOVAs comparing genders across cultures revealed a significant difference on each of the five subscales for men and women. However, comparing mean gender scores in each culture indicated that the only significant difference was found between Canadian men and women on Self-alienation (F\(_{1,513}\) = 5.32; p < .05).
TABLE 2
COMPARING MEAN SUBSCALE SCORES OF LONELINESS COPING STRATEGIES BY CULTURE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Reflection and acceptance</th>
<th>Self-development and understanding</th>
<th>Social support network</th>
<th>Distancing and denial</th>
<th>Religion and faith</th>
<th>Increased activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>639</td>
<td>9.10</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>2.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>469</td>
<td>9.40</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>8.26</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>2.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MANCOVA</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>(6,105)</td>
<td>=0.61</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>6.33</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>1.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>6.06</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>1.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>6.61</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MANCOVA</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>(6,446)</td>
<td>=2.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1093</td>
<td>7.93</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>8.30</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>7.29</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>2.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall MANCOVA</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>(6,507)</td>
<td>=136.25***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ANCOVAs 2 populations**

F (1,1064) = 89.81***
F (1,836) = 462.38***
F (1,892) = 575.17***
F (1,859) = 623.70***
F (1,892) = 281.10***

**MANCOVA Men**

F (6,200) = 107.10***
F (1,252) = 266.55***
F (1,254) = 322.48***
F (1,253) = 454.52***
F (1,250) = 151.26***

**MANCOVA Women**

F (6,232) = 12.03***
F (1,300) = 50.05***
F (1,301) = 163.70***
F (1,300) = 154.74***
F (1,301) = 86.43***

*p < .05  ** p < .01  *** p < .001

1. Ns may not add up due to missing data.
2. Gender, marital status, age and education were covaried.
3. Age and education were covaried.
4. Age, education, and marital status were covaried.

DISCUSSION

To quote the Basic Behavioural Science Task Force (1996), "social, cultural, and environmental forces shape who we are and how well we function in the everyday world" (p. 722). As noted earlier (Rokach & Brock, 1997), for Canadians, loneliness is a multidimensional experience which differs significantly from that of Spaniards. In the present study the authors examined each of the five subscales which comprise loneliness, as participants from the two cultural subgroups endorsed it. Canadians scored higher on all subscales. In general, this may indicate that Canadians are more closely familiar with the various aspects of loneliness, probably because they live in a more individualistic society.

Since the Spanish society centers on relationships, encourages interpersonal interactions, discourages divorce, and most of its members maintain strong family
ties, it stands to reason that the Spaniards would score lower than the Canadians on the loneliness subscales which center on relationships, i.e. Social inadequacy and alienation, and Interpersonal alienation.

Moreover, the fact that Canadians also scored higher on the other three subscales which were centered on the inner personal experiences of loneliness and its correlates (i.e. Emotional distress, Self-alienation, and Growth and discovery) could be related to the fact that the Canadian is a more individualistic society than the Spanish one. Cultural individualism encourages an independent social representation of the person. Collectivistic cultures emphasize relatedness, conformity and harmony in thought, feeling and action (Fiske, Markus, Kitayama, Nisbett, 1998; Hofstede, 1991). Individualistic cultures promote introspection and focus attention on inner experience. In contrast, collectivistic cultures do not encourage focussing attention on the inner self. Evidence suggests that emotional experience is perceived and expressed more intensely in individualistic, rather than in collectivistic cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Scherer, Matsumoto, Wallbott & Kudoh, 1988). To highlight it even further, Basabe et al. (2000) suggested that rich Western countries show a more intense emotional experience and probably a more internalized one. They found also that cold climate and high socioeconomic development (such as the Canadian experience is) were associated with a higher intensity of emotional life.

Growth and discovery is the only subscale which focuses on the positive aspects of loneliness. The higher Canadian score could reflect the North American emphasis on individual achievement and competitiveness, where even the negative events are viewed as opportunities for challenge (Ostrov & Ofer, 1980).

Canadians scored higher than Spaniards on all the subscales, and this pattern appeared for both men and women. However, within each country, a different gender pattern appeared. Comparing the loneliness experience of men and women in each country, it is interesting to note that while Canadian women had significantly lower mean scores than the men, the Spanish sample’s scores were not influenced by gender. Comparing the different dimensions of loneliness, it was found that the North American men had higher mean scores than women on Self-alienation. Medora et al. (1987) found that North American females are lonelier than males, since through socialization they are expected to be that way. Additionally, being more in tune with their feelings, more reflective and able to — more easily than males — confront their fears and weaknesses (Medora et al., 1987), it may be expected that women would score higher on most, if not all, subscales. Rokach and Brock (1997) found such consistent differences in the reported experiences of loneliness between North American men and women. The present results are, therefore, unexpected, especially in the light of the lack of significant differences in the scores of each gender on the four other subscales. The pattern found in the Spanish sample where women scored higher than men (although not significantly so) could
be a consequence of some of the characteristics of the Spanish culture which were previously discussed. Since in Spain relationships are emphasized, the lonely are viewed as "losers". Consequently, while both men and women are hesitant to admit their loneliness, this social pressure has an especially strong effect on men. According to traditional gender role stereotypes, men must not express their feelings overtly (and thus be fully aware of them), while women are more concerned with interpersonal relationships and connectedness than men are (Borys & Perlman, 1985).

In conclusion, support was found for the hypothesis that culture significantly affects the experience of loneliness. Additionally, the present study highlighted the interaction effects of gender and cultural background and found that women experience loneliness differently across cultures, and differently from males in the Canadian culture. It should be noted that, in addition to cultural differences, the samples differed also in age, education, gender composition, and marital status. Although the authors have statistically controlled for these differences, future research should replicate the present study with samples which do not differ on so many variables.

Future research should also explore whether the consistent significant differences between the Canadians and the Spaniards on all five scales are due to cultural differences in experiencing loneliness, or are the result of cultural influences on a response bias. Additionally, due to the intra-cultural variations, future research may collect self-reported data on the individualism-collectivism dimension, as experienced by the participants themselves. It may also be beneficial to explore how loneliness is caused in different cultures, and how various cultural norms affect the effectiveness of coping with it. Of particular interest would be a study which would compare the loneliness experience of North Americans, Europeans, and the third world population.

REFERENCES


## Appendix A

### Sample Items of Subscales: The Experience of Loneliness

1. **Emotional distress**
   - I experienced feelings of intense hurt (.58)*
   - I felt hollow inside like an empty shell (.53)
   - I felt like my heart was breaking (.65)

2. **Social inadequacy and alienation**
   - I felt that people wanted nothing to do with me (.56)
   - I felt inadequate when interacting with others (.67)
   - I felt personally incompetent (.48)

3. **Growth and discovery**
   - I discovered the benefits of solitude (.48)
   - I am more sensitive to others and their needs (.48)
   - Life seems richer and more interesting than it did previously (.70)

4. **Interpersonal isolation**
   - I felt the absence of an especially close friend in my life (.54)
   - There was no one I could really trust (.57)
   - I felt like I did not have a friend in the world (.49)

5. **Self-alienation**
   - I felt as if my mind and body were in different places (.54)
   - I felt numb and immobilized as if in shock (.47)
   - I felt as if I did not know myself (.48)

*The factor loading of the item.*