

Loneliness: The Relationship of Self-Disclosure and Androgyny

John H. Berg

University of Mississippi

Letitia Anne Peplau

University of California, Los Angeles

The relationship of self-disclosure and of psychological masculinity and femininity to the experience of loneliness was examined in a sample of college students. Since both disclosure and sex-typing are important factors in close interpersonal relationships, it was expected that they would also be associated with loneliness—the experience of a deficiency in one's social relations. As predicted, loneliness was negatively correlated with past disclosure, willingness to disclose, and social responsiveness, but only for women. High masculinity and high femininity offered protection against loneliness, with androgynous students being least lonely.

Loneliness is a common and distressing problem for many Americans (see reviews in Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Loneliness is of special interest to social psychologists because it reflects an interpersonal deficit occurring when a person's relationships are fewer or less satisfying than the individual desires. Psychologists have recently begun the important task of identifying factors that contribute to the development and persistence of loneliness. The present study examined two factors—self-disclosure and psychological androgyny—that may facilitate interpersonal relations and so diminish the likelihood of severe loneliness.

LONELINESS AND SELF-DISCLOSURE

There are several reasons to believe that loneliness is associated with low levels of self-disclosure. Lonely people often report that their relationships are superficial and that no one understands them well (see Russell, Peplau, & Ferguson, 1978). Self-disclosure, the sharing of personal information, is widely

AUTHORS' NOTE: This research was supported in part by a National Institute of Mental Health postdoctoral fellowship to Berg. The authors acknowledge the helpful comments of Dan Russell on an earlier version of this article. Address correspondence to John H. Berg, Department of Psychology, University of Mississippi, University, MS 38677.

Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, Vol. 8 No. 4, December 1982 624-630
© 1982 by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc.

believed to be essential to the formation of close relationships (see Altman & Taylor, 1973). The causal link between loneliness and self-disclosure is probably reciprocal. People who are unwilling to reveal themselves and who receive little personal information from others may find their relationships less satisfying and so be more prone to loneliness. On the other hand, loneliness and the social anxiety that can accompany it (Jones, Freeman, & Goswick, 1981) may hamper effective communication and thus inhibit self-disclosure.

Empirical evidence linking loneliness and self-disclosure is mixed. Solano and Batten (Note 1) found that in a structured acquaintance exercise, lonely students chose less intimate topics for disclosure to an opposite-sex target than did nonlonely students, thus supporting the idea that loneliness is related to a reluctance to disclose in the present. In contrast, however, Jones et al. (1981) found no relationship between loneliness and scores on the Jourard (1971) Self-Disclosure Questionnaire, a measure of the extent of past disclosure. To clarify this matter further, the current study included measures of both present willingness to disclose and past disclosure history.

Loneliness may also be affected by a person's social responsiveness and ability to elicit intimate disclosure from others. Recently, Miller, Berg, and Archer (Note 2) developed a scale to identify individuals most likely to enjoy talking to people and capable of facilitating intimate disclosure by others (the Openers Scale). It was predicted that scores on this scale would be negatively correlated with loneliness.

Finally, the relationship between loneliness and self-disclosure may be stronger for women than men. Previous research has indicated that intimate disclosure and friendship are more strongly associated for women than for men (see Jourard, 1971; Rubin & Shenker, 1978). In our culture, women more often than men are trained to be social and emotional specialists for whom the expression of feelings and the sharing of confidences play a central role in close relationships (Peplau & Gordon, *in press*). Thus, the link between low disclosure and loneliness may be more pronounced in women than in men.

PSYCHOLOGICAL MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY

Another factor that may influence loneliness is a person's psychological masculinity and femininity. Because of social desirability pressures, "appropriately" sex-typed people (that is, feminine women and masculine men) may be less lonely than others. The behavior of such individuals may appear more appropriate and predictable than that of nontraditional men or women. They may consequently be at an advantage in getting others to like them. This line of reasoning would predict that for women, loneliness is negatively correlated with femininity and positively correlated with masculinity; for men, the reverse patterns should hold.

Alternatively, strong tendencies toward either femininity or masculinity may reduce loneliness regardless of sex, although for different reasons. Femininity

emphasizes concern for others and emotional responsiveness that should promote the maintenance of satisfying close relationships and so offer protection against loneliness. Masculine characteristics encourage a person to take the initiative in forming new social relations and so may also inhibit loneliness. Thus for both sexes, both high femininity (expressivity) and high masculinity (instrumentality) may be negatively associated with loneliness. Androgynous individuals who score high on both masculine and feminine traits may be the least likely to feel lonely. In contrast, individuals who score low on both masculine and feminine traits should be the most vulnerable to loneliness.

METHOD

Participants

College students, 89 men and 129 women, participated in partial fulfillment of requirements for their introductory psychology course. All participants were tested in group sessions. Previous research (for example, Cutrona, 1982) has shown that college students are a high-risk group for loneliness.

Measures

Loneliness Scale. Loneliness was assessed by a 28-item scale adapted from the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980). Questions assessed feelings of being alone and socially isolated, both in the last few years and also in the last few weeks. A single score was derived by summing subjects' answers to the 28 questions; high scores indicated greater loneliness.

Miller Topic Inventory. The MTI (Miller, Berg, & Archer, Note 2) includes 10 topics, all of a general and fairly intimate nature (for example, "what is most important to me in life," "what I like and dislike about myself"). Respondents indicate the extent to which they have disclosed in the past on each of these topics to a same-sex friend and to an opposite-sex friend. Two scores are derived by summing responses to the 10 questions for each target.

Self-Disclosure Situations Survey. The SDSS (Chelune, 1976) is a 20-item scale assessing willingness to disclose in situations varying in intimacy and involving different disclosure targets. A single score measuring overall willingness to disclose is obtained by summing responses to the 20 questions.

Openers Scale. The OS (Miller, Berg, & Archer, Note 2) consists of 10 questions. Items involve perceived reactions of others (such as "People feel relaxed around me"), interpersonal skills (such as "I can keep people talking about themselves"), and interest in listening to others (such as, "I enjoy listening to people"). Respondents indicate the extent to which each item is characteristic of them. A single score is obtained by summing responses to the 10 questions. Research has demonstrated that high scorers on the OS are better able to elicit intimate disclosure from others and are skilled in the use of nonverbal cues (Miller, Berg, & Archer, Note 2; Dabbs & Hopper, Note 3). It has been suggested that people scoring high on the OS are particularly receptive and socially responsive in communicative interactions.

Personal Attributes Questionnaire. The short form of the PAQ (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1974) has three subscales. The masculinity (M) scale is composed of 8 items judged to be desirable for both sexes but more characteristic of the "typical male" than the "typical female." The femininity (F) scale is composed of 8 items judged to be desirable for both sexes but more characteristic of the "typical female." The bipolar M-F scale consists of items that are perceived to differentiate the "ideal male" and "ideal female" as well as the "typical male" and "typical female." The M-F scale is scored in the masculine direction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Loneliness and Self-Disclosure

Analyses of loneliness and self-disclosure are summarized in Table 1. On three of the four disclosure measures, loneliness was significantly correlated with lower disclosure, but only for women. Lonely women had disclosed less to a same-sex friend in the past, were less willing to disclose in the present, and rated themselves less interested and skilled in listening to others. For men, no significant correlations were found between loneliness and the self-disclosure measures. The differences between men's and women's correlations on these three variables were significant (all p 's < .006).

These results do not, unfortunately, resolve inconsistencies in the two earlier studies of loneliness and self-disclosure, although they suggest that the distinction between past disclosure and present willingness to disclose may not account for the differing results of Solano and Batten (Note 1) versus Jones et al. (1981). The explanation for why loneliness is not invariably correlated with low self-disclosure awaits further investigation. The current results do, however, suggest that efforts to understand the association of loneliness and disclosure must consider men and women separately. It appears that self-disclosure may be more central to satisfying social relationships for women than for men. A woman may experience loneliness when she is unable to share feelings and confidences with friends, even if she interacts with them in other, less intimate ways. In contrast, since men are traditionally taught to exercise restraint in sharing their feelings, self-disclosure may be a less central component of men's relationships (see Caldwell & Peplau, in press; Jourard, 1971; Rubin & Shenker, 1978) and hence a less important factor in loneliness.

Psychological Masculinity and Femininity

Past research has not found significant differences in overall loneliness scores between men and women (for example, Russell et al., 1980). This was also the case in the present study; ($F(1, 208) = 2.65$, ns. Inspection of Table 1 indicates, however, that the psychological dimensions of masculinity and femininity were important concomitants of loneliness in this sample. The M and M-F subscales of the PAQ were negatively correlated with loneliness for both sexes; the F subscale was negatively correlated with loneliness for women.

TABLE 1 Correlates of Loneliness

	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
Past disclosure (MTI)		
To same-sex friend	-.06	-.31***
To other-sex friend	-.07	-.11
Willingness to disclose (SDSS)	.02	-.57***
Social responsiveness (OS)	-.11	-.57***
Masculinity and femininity		
Masculinity scale	-.42***	-.44***
Femininity scale	-.16	-.34***
M-F scale (high score = masculine)	-.29*	-.19*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .02$; *** $p < .001$

Thus, the idea that the least lonely individuals would be masculine men and feminine women found only marginal support in our data. Instead, the data suggested that both high instrumentality and high expressivity were associated with lower loneliness in both sexes.

To examine further the effects of masculinity and femininity, the loneliness scores of men and women were regressed on scores for the M and F scales of the PAQ and M \times F interaction term. As advocated by Lubinski, Tellegen, and Butcher (1981), hierarchical regressions were performed with the M and F terms entered before the interaction term.

The results of these regression analyses closely parallel the results obtained from the simple correlational analyses. For men, masculinity accounted for 17.3% of the variance in loneliness scores, when controlling for femininity; $F(1, 78) = 14.08$ $p < .001$. Femininity and the interaction between masculinity and femininity added less than 1% to the variance accounted for. For women, the first step, entering the M and F terms, accounted for 24.5% of the variance in loneliness. Both terms had significant F values; for the M scale, $F(1, 126) = 23.36$, $p < .001$; for the F scale, $F(1, 126) = 11.02$, $p < .001$. Addition of the interaction term accounted for less than 1% additional variance.

While the correlational nature of this study makes any conclusions about the direction of causality speculative, it is nonetheless useful to consider the mechanisms through which masculinity and femininity may affect loneliness. First, Bender, Davis, Glover, and Stapp (1976) reported significant relationships between self-disclosure and PAQ scale scores. The present study essentially replicates these findings. When disclosure scores were regressed on PAQ scale scores, significant multiple Rs were found in all cases (p 's $< .03$), except for the regression of the SDSS for men ($p < .08$). Thus, the link between loneliness and masculinity/femininity may be mediated by self-disclosure. However, this possibility is weakened by the finding that when partial

correlations were calculated, controlling for any one of the disclosure scales, the relationships between loneliness and the PAQ subscales remained virtually unchanged from those reported in Table 1.

A second explanation, suggested in the introduction, is that androgynous individuals possess various social skills that facilitate their initiating and maintaining satisfying social relationships. Here, both psychological masculinity and femininity would make separate but additive contributions. A final possibility involves mediation through self-esteem. Past research has linked high self-esteem to high scores on masculinity and femininity (Spence & Helmreich, 1978) and also to lower levels of loneliness (Russell et al., 1980). Future research might profitably explore all three of these factors.

In conclusion, the present study has demonstrated the importance of self-disclosure and psychological androgyny in the experience of loneliness. Although men and women may not differ in the overall levels of loneliness they experience, loneliness appears to have different correlates for the two sexes. For both men and women, psychological masculinity and femininity may reduce vulnerability to loneliness.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. Solano, C. B., & Batten, P. *Loneliness and objective self-disclosure in an acquaintanceship exercise*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, New York, September 1979.
2. Miller, L. C., Berg, J. H., & Archer, R. L. *Who becomes intimate with whom? Two personality variables that affect self-disclosure*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Montreal, September 1980.
3. Dabbs, J., & Hopper, C. *The "opener": Skilled user of facial expression and speech pattern*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Los Angeles, September 1981.

REFERENCES

- Altman, I., & Taylor, D. A. *Social penetration: The development of interpersonal relationships*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973.
- Bender, V. L., Davis, Y., Glover, O., & Stapp, J. Patterns of self-disclosure in homosexual and heterosexual college students. *Sex Roles*, 1976, 2, 149-160.
- Caldwell, M. A., & Peplau, L. A. Sex differences in same-sex friendships. *Sex Roles*, in press.
- Chelune, G. J. The self-disclosure situation survey: A new approach to measuring self-disclosure. *JSAS Catalog of Selected Documents in Psychology*, 1976, 6, 111-112.
- Cutrona, C. E. Transition to college: Loneliness and the process of social adjustment. In L. A. Peplau & D. Perlman (Eds.), *Loneliness: A sourcebook of current theory, research, and therapy*. New York: Wiley, 1982.
- Jones, W. H., Freemon, J. E., & Goswick, R. A. The persistence of loneliness. *Journal of Personality*, 1981, 49, 27-48.

- Jourard, S. M. *Self-disclosure: An experimental analysis of the transparent self*. New York: Wiley-Interscience, 1971.
- Lubinski, D., Tellegen, A., & Butcher, J. N. The relationship between androgyny and subjective indicators of emotional well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1981, 40, 722-730.
- Peplau, L. A., & Gordon, S. L. Sex differences in close relationships. In V. E. O'Leary, R. K. Unger, and B. S. Wallston (Eds.), *Women, gender and social psychology*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, in press.
- Peplau, L. A., & Perlman, D. (Eds.). *Loneliness: A sourcebook of current theory, research and therapy*. New York: Wiley, 1982.
- Rubin, Z., & Shenker, S. Friendship, proximity and self-disclosure. *Journal of Personality*, 1978, 46, 1-22.
- Russell, D., Peplau, L. A., & Cutrona, C. E. The revised UCLA Loneliness Scale. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1980, 39, 471-480.
- Russell, D., Peplau, L. A., & Ferguson, M. L. Developing a measure of loneliness. *Journal of Personality and Assessment*, 1978, 42, 290-294.
- Spence, J. T., & Helmreich, R. L. *Masculinity and femininity: Their psychological dimensions, correlates and antecedents*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978.
- Spence, J. T., Helmreich, R. L., & Stapp, J. A. The personal attributes questionnaire. *JSAS Catalog of Selected Documents in Psychology*, 1974, 4, 43.

John H. Berg is Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Mississippi. His research interests include self-disclosure, loneliness, and close relationships.

Letitia Anne Peplau is Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her research interests include sex roles, loneliness, and close relationships.