How Does Culture Influence the Degree of Romantic Loneliness and Closeness?

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ABSTRACT. A culture promoting a strong desire for romantic relationships can greatly influence feelings of romantic loneliness and of closeness. In this study, the authors hypothesized that when not in a romantic relationship, U.S. young adults experience greater degrees of romantic loneliness because of a high desire for romantic relationships, compared with Korean young adults. The authors also predicted that when in a romantic relationship, U.S. young adults experience greater closeness to their romantic partner than do Korean young adults. Results revealed that in a sample of 227 U.S. and Korean students, U.S. students reported significantly higher levels of romantic loneliness than did Koreans when not in a romantic relationship and significantly lower levels of romantic loneliness when in a stable romantic relationship. U.S. students also reported a greater degree of closeness in romantic relationships than did Korean students. The results suggest that Western cultures’ strong emphasis on the importance of romantic relationships may unduly amplify individuals’ levels of loneliness.

Keywords: cross-cultural, loneliness, romantic relationships

ONE COMMONLY HELD SOCIETAL BELIEF is that loneliness is caused by a lack of a romantic partner and is cured by being in a romantic relationship. Weiss (1989), for example, documented this belief in his research and commented that romantic relationships seemed to be an antiloneliness pill for single parents in America. Other researchers have shown the lack of romantic partners or intimate relationships to be an important perceived causal factor for one’s present feelings of loneliness (Rokach & Brock, 1998; Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982). However,
this belief linking loneliness to romantic relationships may be a Western concept. Goodwin (1999) proposed that Western cultures such as North America place great importance on romantic love, probably as a solution to disconnection experienced in these individualistic cultures. In some sense, romantic relationships may be viewed as the opposite of loneliness: the ideal intimate relationship. Thus, this belief may have a negative effect on lonely individuals in Western cultures. It is possible that in Western cultures, which heighten the desire for romantic relationships, the absence of romantic relationships can, on one hand, unnecessarily amplify feelings of loneliness compared with non-Western cultures. On the other hand, individuals from Western cultures who are already in romantic relationships may experience a greater degree of closeness compared with individuals in non-Western cultures because of the greater importance place on romantic love.

**Culture as an Influence on Romantic Loneliness**

In one of the more influential models of loneliness, Peplau and Perlman (1982) described loneliness as a discrepancy between desired and achieved levels of social interaction. This model is particularly useful because it focuses on the subjective nature of loneliness and helps to explain why individuals may experience different levels of loneliness in similar situations. For example, two people may be alone, but one person may experience loneliness because he or she desires company, and the other person may not experience loneliness because he or she is studying for an exam and wishes to be alone. The model can also be useful in explaining varying levels of loneliness in romantic situations (defined as romantic loneliness by DiTommaso & Spinner, 1993) among cultures that promote different levels of desire for romantic relationships. Western cultures promote strong levels of desire for romantic relationships compared with non-Western cultures (Goodwin, 1999; Medora, Larson, Hortaçsu, & Dave, 2002). Therefore, when a person from a Western culture is not in a romantic relationship, he or she may experience a high level of loneliness because of the intense desire to be in a romantic relationship. Conversely, a person from a non-Western culture may have less of a desire to be in a romantic relationship and thus less feelings of loneliness.

If romantic relationships are more highly desired in Western cultures than in non-Western cultures, then it is also possible that Westerners experience a greater degree of closeness to their romantic partners than do their non-Western counterparts. A close relationship would include such features as “a sense of connectedness, shared understandings, mutual responsiveness, mutual dependence, self-disclosure, or intersubjectivity” (Aron & Mashek, 2004, p. 417). Medora et al. (2002) found that American college students were more likely to believe in unrealistic and idealized romantic notions such as love at first sight and the ideal mate than were Turkish or Indian college students. It is possible that Westerners experience a greater degree of closeness in romantic relationships because of the combination of (a) having a greater desire for romantic relationships and
therefore investing more into these relationships and (b) having unrealistic and idealized romantic notions that can amplify the effect of being in a romantic relationship. Previous researchers have not directly addressed the issue of cross-cultural differences of closeness in romantic relationships.

Korea provides a good contrast to the United States in terms of cultural emphasis on the desire for romantic relationships among adolescents and young adults. According to Youn (2001), Korean parents of adolescents are usually disappointed or worried if their child meets members of the opposite sex because there is a belief in Korean society that adolescents who meet members of the opposite sex will become failures in their adult lives. Goodwin (1999) also pointed out that unlike Western cultures, which rely heavily on romantic relationships as a source of psychological intimacy, non-Western collectivistic cultures such as Korea have other strong sources of intimacy, such as parents and siblings. In fact, the importance of love for choosing a marital partner is more prevalent in Western countries such as the United States, England, and Australia than it is in non-Western countries such as Japan and India (Levine, Sato, Hashimoto, & Verma, 1995). Whereas individuals in Western countries such as the United States view romantic relationships as possibly the most important and central source of love and intimacy (and thus as very needed and desired), individuals in non-Western countries such as Korea may not view romantic relationships with the same degree of importance as a source of love and psychological intimacy.

**Hypotheses**

In this study, we explored the association between romantic relationships, the degree of closeness within these relationships, and romantic loneliness within a Western country (United States) and a non-Western country (Korea) to test the following two hypotheses. First, we hypothesized that U.S. participants who have romantic relationships would experience less romantic loneliness than would Korean participants, but that U.S. participants who do not have romantic relationships would experience greater romantic loneliness than would Korean participants. Second, we hypothesized that U.S. participants who have romantic relationships would report a greater degree of closeness to their romantic partners than would Korean participants.

**Method**

**Participants and Procedure**

Participants were 271 students taking introductory social science courses in U.S. and Korean public universities who volunteered to take part in the study. Of the participants, 170 were from the United States, and 101 were from Korea. The majority of participants in both the U.S. and the Korean samples were female.
(87% and 95%, respectively), with the Korean sample having a significantly greater proportion of women than the U.S. sample, \( t(269) = -2.13, p = .03 \). All participants reported not being married. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 25 years. The mean age of the U.S. sample (\( M = 19.67 \) years, \( SD = 1.28 \) years) was slightly lower than that of the Korean sample (\( M = 22.44 \) years, \( SD = 1.38 \) years). A \( t \) test showed this age difference to be significant, \( t(269) = -16.68, p < .01 \). We did not collect any other demographic data.

To detect changes in the romantic partners of participants over time, we administered the questionnaire separately in the two countries at two points in time: once at the beginning of each country’s respective spring semester (Time 1 [T1]) and again at the end of their respective spring semester (Time 2 [T2]). The length of time (approximately 13 weeks) between the two data collection points was approximately the same in both countries.

Further analysis revealed that majority of both U.S. and Korean participants either were in the same romantic relationship at both T1 and T2 or reported not being in a romantic relationship at either T1 or T2. These participants constituted 83–84% of both samples. Forty-eight percent of participants in both countries reported not being in a romantic relationship at either time point, whereas 35% of the U.S. participants and 36% of the Korean participants reported being in the same relationship at both time points. The proportions of participants either in a romantic relationship or not in a romantic relationship were not significantly different between the two samples. Because of the small number of participants who had a change in their romantic relationships from T1 to T2, we did not include these participants in the analyses.

**Measures**

We used two measures to assess participants’ levels of romantic loneliness and their romantic social network. A translator translated the questionnaire into Korean, and a second translator then independently back-translated it into English to ensure that the Korean questionnaire was approximately the same as the English questionnaire.

**Romantic loneliness.** We measured romantic loneliness using one of the subscales of the short version of the Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults (SELSA; DiTommaso & Spinner, 1993). It consists of five items such as “I have an unmet need for a close romantic relationship.” Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale with answers ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The scale showed good reliability with Cronbach’s \( \alpha \)s of .85 and .86 at T1 and T2, respectively.

**Romantic social network.** We adapted this measure from that of Williams and Solano (1983). The measure consisted of two parts. The first part asked respondents to give
the initials of their romantic partner. If respondents had the same initials for their romantic partner at both T1 and T2, this indicated a stable romantic partner. The absence of initials at both T1 and T2 indicated no romantic relationship over the period. Thus, we used this measure to determine relationship status (i.e., whether respondents had either a stable romantic relationship or no romantic relationship from T1 to T2). The second part of the measure, also adapted from that of Williams and Solano, asked participants who reported having a romantic partner to indicate how close they are to their romantic partner on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all close) to 7 (very close).

Results

Association Between Relationship Status and Romantic Loneliness Across the United States and Korea

We conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to test the hypothesis that culture influences the degree of romantic loneliness experienced. Participants’ romantic loneliness at T1 and T2 was the repeated measure, and we entered it as the dependent variable into the MANOVA. We entered country and relationship status as independent variables. The analysis controlled for age and gender. There were no significant within-subject effects. However, the between-subjects results revealed that (a) relationship status had a significant main effect, $F(1, 186) = 377.18, p < .01$; (b) country did not have a significant main effect; and (c) the interaction between country and relationship status was significant, $F(1, 186) = 186.06, p < .01$. A follow-up post hoc test revealed that romantic loneliness was significantly greater for both U.S., $t(128) = 25.26, p < .01$, and Korean, $t(83) = 3.94, p < .01$, students who were not in a romantic relationship compared with those who were in a romantic relationship.

Figure 1 shows the interaction effect of romantic loneliness averaged across T1 and T2. U.S. students who were not in a romantic relationship reported higher romantic loneliness than did Korean students who were not in a romantic relationship. However, U.S. students who were in the same stable, romantic relationship reported lower levels of loneliness than did their Korean counterparts.

Degree of Closeness for U.S. and Korean Participants in a Stable Romantic Relationship

We conducted a MANOVA to determine whether U.S. students in romantic relationships reported greater levels of closeness within these relationships. The MANOVA compared the levels of closeness in romantic relationships at T1 and T2 for U.S. and Korean students, while controlling for age and gender. The results showed no significant within-subject effects, suggesting that the levels of closeness did not significantly change from T1 to T2. However, the between-
subjects results showed a significant difference between the levels of closeness for U.S. and Korean students, $F(1, 92) = 5.76, p = .02$. Across T1 and T2, U.S. students reported significantly greater levels of closeness than did Korean students (see Figure 2).

**Discussion**

The results of this study provide evidence for our hypotheses that culture influences both the level of romantic loneliness that individuals experience and the degree of closeness that they experience. The results suggest that romantic relationships have significantly greater influence on romantic loneliness for U.S. students than for Korean students. U.S. students reported significantly stronger feelings of romantic loneliness when a romantic partner was absent and significantly weaker feelings of romantic loneliness when a romantic partner was present in comparison with Korean students. It is interesting to note that in both countries, having a romantic relationship is related to decreased loneliness. However, although having a romantic relationship can reduce feelings of loneliness in both countries, the process seems amplified among U.S. participants.

The findings also revealed that U.S. students reported significantly higher levels of closeness in their romantic relationships than did Korean students.
These higher levels could be an indication of individuals’ placing greater importance on these relationships in the United States than in Korea.

This research is an important first step in thinking about how loneliness, romantic relationships, and culture interact. Previous researchers investigating loneliness have focused on how it varies cross-culturally without considering the possible influence of romantic relationships. Future researchers should investigate if the findings remain the same when contrasting different Western and non-Western countries.

This study had two main limitations. First, the sample was primarily female. It is possible that there are gender differences in how much importance men and women ascribe to romantic relationships cross-culturally, which would thus affect their levels of romantic loneliness. Second, there was a small amount of error associated with determining whether a respondent had a stable romantic relationship or no romantic relationship. It is possible that a respondent may have switched romantic partners from T1 to T2, but if both romantic partners had the same initials, we would have incorrectly coded this scenario as a stable romantic relationship. It is similarly possible that a person had a romantic relationship between T1 and T2 but not when the data were collected, resulting in our incorrectly coding the person as having no romantic relationship. However, we determined these errors to be acceptable because of the small possibility that either scenario occurred.

In conclusion, in Western culture, in which romantic relationships are heavily emphasized, lonely individuals often assume that the reason for their loneliness is...
the lack of a romantic partner. The results of the present study suggest that it is not only the absence of a romantic partner that causes such strong feelings of loneliness but also the social expectation of having a romantic partner.

AUTHOR NOTES

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