

Loneliness among Students with Blindness and Sighted Students in Jordan: A brief report

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This study investigated loneliness among students with blindness and those who are sighted in Jordan, and examined whether loneliness levels vary according to gender. Students included 90 students with blindness and 79 sighted students selected from high schools and universities in the capital city of Amman. The instrument used to collect information in this study was an Arabic translation and adapted version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale developed by Russell in 1996. The results indicated that students with blindness reported significantly higher degrees of loneliness than sighted students; however, no significant differences were attributable to gender or interaction between visual status and gender. The implications of the findings for families and teachers of students with blindness, and for future research in Jordan, are offered.

Keywords: adolescents; Arab countries; blindness; Jordan; loneliness; social isolation; vision impairment; young adults

Introduction

Loneliness is a pervasive social problem that is experienced universally, regardless of one's gender, age or cultural background (Rokach & Bacanli, 2001). It has been defined as the absence or perceived absence of satisfying social relationships (Page, 1990). The research literature provides evidence suggesting that loneliness is a risk factor for socio-emotional adjustment difficulties among adolescents (Coplan, Closson, & Arbeau, 2007). Loneliness is quite common and especially intense in adolescence (Krause-Parello, 2008; Le Roux, 2009; Woodward & Frank, 1988). Several factors have been shown to be significantly associated with loneliness among adolescents, including the quality of their social relationships (Howell, Hauser-Cram, & Kersh, 2007; Whitehouse, Durkin, Jaquet, & Ziatas, 2009). Results of previous studies on gender differences in loneliness have been contradictory (Borys & Perlman, 1985; Clinton & Anderson, 1999; Levin, 1986; Tornstam, 1992). Usually, statistically significant gender differences are not found, but, when they are found, males typically are reported to be lonelier than females (Koenig & Abrams, 1999).

Many studies have shown that, compared with students without disabilities, students with disabilities exhibit higher levels of loneliness (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Coplan et al., 2007; McVilly, Stancliffe, Parmenter, & Burton-Smith, 2006; Pavri, 2001; Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000; Stancliffe, Lakin, Taub, Chiri, & Byun, 2009; White & Roberson-Nay, 2009; Whitehouse et al., 2009). Research has often associated the loneliness experienced by students with disabilities to the deficits they have in social

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skills and the difficulties they face in peer relationships (Margalit & Ben-Dov, 1995; Yu, Zhang, & Yan, 2005).

The research literature shows that vision impairment might negatively impact a person's psychosocial development (Huurre, 2000; Zell Sacks, Kekelis, & Gaylord-Ross, 1992). Several studies in the last two decades have reported that students with vision impairment exhibit higher levels of loneliness, especially in adolescence (Frame, 2000; Gold, 2002; Huurre & Aro, 1998; Rogow, 1999).

Although students with blindness were among the first groups with disabilities in Jordan to receive special education and rehabilitation (Hadidi, 1998), they are among the least studied. A recent review of special education research published in the last decade in Jordan and other Arab countries revealed that out of 216 studies reviewed, 10 studies were related to blindness and vision impairment (Al Khateeb, 2009). None of these studies addressed feelings of loneliness among students with blindness, and only one study investigated social support received by pre-adolescents with blindness (Shawareb, 2005). This study found that the support network for sighted students was significantly larger than that available to students with vision impairments. One study by Batayneh (2005) investigated the level of loneliness experienced by 238 students with physical disabilities. These students were found to experience moderate levels of loneliness. No statistically significant differences were found for gender, social status, or nature of work.

In the present study, the differences in loneliness experienced by Jordanian students with and without blindness were examined. This issue has not been addressed in this country thus far. The study attempted to answer the following two questions:

- (1) Do students with blindness and sighted students in Jordan experience significantly different levels of loneliness?
- (2) Does gender play a significant role in the degree of loneliness experienced?

Method

Participants

A purposefully selected sample of 90 students with blindness (51 females and 39 males) and 79 sighted students (44 females and 35 males) participated in this study. School students were recruited through personal contact with school principals, and university students were contacted personally. All participants with blindness were Braille users. Sighted students were selected through a convenient sample from regular schools and universities attended by students with blindness. The age of the students ranged from 15 to 22 years (mean = 17.01, standard deviation = 6.03).

Instrument

An Arabic version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996), which is composed of 10 items worded in a simple and neutral format, was used to collect data in this study. The scale was translated into Arabic, and the accuracy of the translation as well as its appropriateness to the Arabic culture were assessed by a panel of five individuals knowledgeable in both the Arabic and English languages. The panel approved the translation and recommended only minor changes of the Arabic language. The panel was then asked to judge the appropriateness of the translated scale for measuring loneliness. The scale was judged as appropriate and the panel recommended no changes in the number or content of the items. This measure was considered sufficient for establishing

the face validity of the Arabic version of the scale. Using Cronbach's alpha, the reliability of the Arabic version of the scale was 0.83. Students were asked to rate themselves on a numerical scale from one (never) to four (always). A score was obtained by adding all responses together, with higher numbers indicating a higher degree of loneliness.

Procedure

The study objectives were explained to school administrators. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity of the data. Hence, no information related to the personal identity of participants was collected. Informed consent from participants was obtained verbally.

The first author and a research assistant holding a doctorate in educational and psychological measurement collected the data from the students. The instrument was administered individually to the students with blindness, and each question was read as many times as needed before the responses were recorded. Sighted students completed the instrument individually. The response rate was high for both students with blindness (94%) and sighted students (82%).

Analysis

Analyses were performed with SPSS 14 (Norusis, 2006). The differences in the age means were examined by two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), and the correlation between age and the total scores of loneliness was calculated. A 2×2 ANOVA was used to examine the impact of vision status and gender on the dependent variable (scores on the loneliness scale). Both statistical significance and effect size were calculated.

Results

The differences in the age means were examined by two-way ANOVA. The results showed no significant differences in the mean age according to gender ($F(1, 168) = 1.93$, $p = 0.167$) or group ($F(1, 168) = 0.03$, $p = 0.870$). Additionally, the correlation between age and the total scores of loneliness was calculated, and no significant correlations were found ($p = 0.27$).

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of loneliness experienced by students in relation to vision status and gender. The data revealed that the level of loneliness reported by students with blindness was higher than that reported by sighted students.

A 2×2 ANOVA was conducted with loneliness as the dependent variable and vision status and gender as independent variables. The data showed that vision status had a significant effect ($F(1, 168) = 3.94$, $p = 0.05$) with a small effect size, calculated using eta squared, at 0.012.

The differences between sighted students and students with blindness were thus statistically significant. However, there was no statistically significant effect for gender

Table 1. Loneliness reported by students in relation to visual status and gender.

	Male		Female	
	Blind	Sighted	Blind	Sighted
Loneliness	2.44 (0.66)	2.25 (0.61)	2.53 (0.71)	2.32 (0.65)

Note: Data presented as mean (standard deviation).

($F(1,168) = 0.64, p = 0.42$) or the interaction between vision status and gender ($F(1,168) = 0.01, p = 0.94$).

Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore loneliness among students with blindness and sighted students in Jordan. The results suggested that, compared with sighted students, students with blindness report higher degrees of loneliness. In this regard, the findings of the present study are consistent with several previous studies conducted in other cultures that have reported higher levels of loneliness among students with blindness (for example, George & Duquette, 2006; McGaha & Farran, 2001). The authors were unable to compare similarities and/or differences with results of studies in similar cultures because they could not find any study addressing feelings of loneliness among students with blindness in Jordan or other Arab countries. Possible factors explaining this finding were not explored in this research. Since many studies have reported that developmental difficulties faced by students with vision impairments may vary as a function of age at onset and severity of vision impairment (Scholl, 1986; Warren, 1989), it is suggested that future research in Jordan might investigate such variables. Other factors that may contribute to loneliness in students with blindness include: received social support, duration of visual impairment, adaptation to vision loss, and feelings of depression (Barron, Foxall, Von Dollen, Shull, & Jones, 1992; Verstraten, Brinkmann, Stevens, & Schouten, 2005).

The results also demonstrated that there were no significant gender differences in the level of loneliness experienced by the study participants. This finding is consistent with findings of studies conducted in other countries despite significant differences in cultural traditions and attitudes towards gender (for example, Huurre, 2000; Kef, 2002). Additionally, the results revealed no significant correlation between age and the total scores of loneliness; however, the age range of study participants was not wide (i.e., 15–22 years). Since the results of previous studies related to age differences in loneliness are mixed (Jylha, 2004; Perlman, 1990), the question of the extent of loneliness as people age needs to be addressed by future research.

Conclusion

The results of this study may have important implications for families and teachers of students with blindness in Jordan. Since loneliness in students is typically viewed as a risk factor for emotional difficulties (Page et al., 2006; White & Roberson-Nay, 2009), appropriate training and counselling programmes need to be offered to students with blindness to reduce the loneliness they may experience.

The limitations of this study should also be considered. This study was conducted on a feasible sample and not a random sample, and its size was relatively small. The results thus cannot be generalised to all students with blindness in Jordan. Another limitation of the study is the use of different interview procedures for the students with blindness and for the students without blindness. Future researchers may consider using computer-assisted self-interviewing so that the comparisons are more equivalent. When using computer-assisted self-interviewing, the interviewer is with the respondent in a room and reads the question out loud. The respondent then types the answer (a number) on the laptop (De Leeuw, Hox, & Kef, 2003). Finally, the study results are limited by the dimensions identified by the Arabic version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale. Investigations using other data-collection methods are needed.

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