Loneliness and Social Support: The Effects of Roommates on the Social Network

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Dr. Bruce Wheeler  
University Honors Program  
F101 Melrose Hall  
CAMPUS  

Dear Dr. Wheeler:

On April 21, 1993, Melissa Berry's Research Committee conducted an oral examination regarding her Tennessee Scholar's project titled "Loneliness and social support: The effects of roommates on the social network." The Committee included Dr. William Calhoun, Dr. Warren Jones (Chair), and Dr. John Lounsbury. The unanimous judgment of the Committee is that her project clearly meets all relevant standards. A copy of the project is enclosed.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Warren H. Jones, Ph.D.  
Professor and Head

Enclosure
Loneliness and Social Support

The Effects of Roommates on the Social Network

Melissa E. Berry

University of Tennessee

April 21, 1993
Abstract

Many studies have indicated that loneliness and social support are negatively correlated. This project added the third variable of roommate relationship with the hypothesis that living environment is significantly related to an individual's feelings of loneliness. Accordingly, roommates should be a stronger component of the social network than non-roommates. One hundred and eighteen college students were asked to fill out a 2-part survey consisting of the UCLA Loneliness Scale and the College Network List. The UCLA Loneliness Scale is the most widely used index of global loneliness. The College Network List was developed for this project to assess both the roommate and non-roommate social support available for each respondent. Contrary to the hypothesis, the non-roommate social support was significantly related to loneliness ($r = -0.492, p < .01$) while the roommate social support was not significantly correlated to loneliness. The results did agree with previous research that suggests that loneliness is negatively correlated both to social support ($p < .01$) and to satisfaction with that support ($p < .01$). This study concluded that the establishment of a social network outside the dormitory room is more important than the support from a roommate. Therefore, random assignment of roommates by universities does not appear to be detrimental to college students.
Loneliness and Social Support

The Effects of Roommates on the Social Network

The modern individual is often isolated by fears of crime, divorce, political upheaval, and personal betrayal by friends and relatives. College students with their first experiences away from home are particularly susceptible to these feelings of loneliness as they try to create new social networks on campus. Indeed many studies have looked at both loneliness and social support—separately and together. This project added the third variable of college roommate and looked at the role of the roommate in the social support network and his or her influence on loneliness. The study correlated the loneliness score of the UCLA Loneliness Scale to the roommate and non-roommate social support scores of the College Network List—a survey developed for this research project.

The college years are filled with important decisions and can be the most difficult in an individual's life. Questions about choice of major, choice of classes, grades, and job versus graduate school all serve to confuse the young college student. Often added to this stress of academic pressure is the student's first experience away from home and parents. New friends must be found, and many adjustments must be made to everything from community baths and campus food to roommate relations and feelings of homesickness and loneliness. One study reports that only a third of college students graduate in four years, and half of entering freshmen drop out within their first two years. Loneliness is probably a key factor in this high
attrition rate (Newman, 1971). But why are most students able to integrate themselves into the college environment while others are left in social isolation? Is roommate support an important part in this adjustment to college life? Can a bad roommate relationship increase loneliness?

Not surprisingly, loneliness--"the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's social relations is [sic] deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively" (Perlman & Peplau, 1981, p. 31)--appears to be rampant on college campuses. In fact, many studies have suggested that young adults are even more prone to loneliness than older adults (Blau, 1973; Lowenthal, Thurner, & Chiriboga, 1976). Often this heightened loneliness in college students is attributed to the new student's need to develop an entirely new group of campus friends--a social network of people who can be counted on for emotional support during the difficult college years. This social support is defined by Sarason, Levine, Basham, and Sarason (1983) "as the existence...of people on whom we can rely" (p. 127).

Most new freshmen come to college lacking the social ties which provide support on campus. At the beginning of the school year, 75% of the new students in one study reported feelings of loneliness. By the end of the year, only 25% of the participants still experienced loneliness. During the year, the majority of students had developed strong social support networks. Students who remained lonely at the year's end blamed their own personality flaws for their inability to make friends while their less lonely counterparts reported that both their
personality traits and the college situation itself were responsible for their earlier loneliness (Cutrona, 1982).

However, the same college situation that creates isolation through large classes and distance from family and high school friends also provides at least one opportunity for a close friendship--the roommate. The college roommate relationship has been called by Carey, Hamilton, and Shanklin (1986) a "potential situation for promoting growth because...it is...[the] first intense relationship outside the family" (p. 269). A roommate can be a companion, a dinner partner, a study buddy, a nurse, a listener, and a friend. However, he or she can also be an enemy living within the same four small walls. Obviously, roommates are important in some way, but does the roommate situation have an impact on the social support network and, in turn, on an individual's feelings of loneliness? Does choice as opposed to random assignment of roommate have significantly different consequences for the individual? Can an otherwise strong social support network compensate for a bad roommate situation? This project uses a survey format to look at these questions in the hopes of offering some insight into the problem of loneliness on university campuses.

**Literature Review**

Many studies have already been done on loneliness--both from trait and state perspectives. Questions such as "Who is lonely?" and "What situations cause loneliness?" are important to researchers in the field. One such study developed a prototype of the classic lonely person. Participants chose
adjectives like "introverted" and "depressed" to describe the lonely prototype. Lonely subjects reported that they had trouble making friends at parties and telephoning potential friends (Horowitz, French, & Anderson, 1982). In general, lonely students consider themselves shy, anxious, and suspicious of others (Jones, Freemon, & Goswick, 1981). In groups, the lonely frequently change conversation topics and ask fewer questions than the non-lonely (Jones, Hobbs, & Hockenbury, 1982). Not surprisingly, college students who have trouble socializing are probably not going to make many friends in the close quarters of the college environment.

More generally, loneliness has been linked to depression (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980), low self-esteem (Loucks, 1980), and feelings of inferiority (Goswick & Jones, 1982). Research has so far been divided in determining whether or not gender is related to loneliness. Studies by Kivett (1979) show women to be more lonely, but Avery (1982) and Franzoi and Davis (1985) find that men are lonelier. Women seem to need close relationships to avoid loneliness while men appear to rely on more group-oriented experiences (Stokes & Levin, 1986). However, research by Berg and Peplau (1982) suggests that men and women who fit strong gender stereotypes are less likely to be lonely. Highly feminine women with their nurturing tendencies are able to make and maintain close relationships, and highly masculine men are aggressive enough to make social contacts.

Some loneliness research has focused on the social comparison theory. According to this norm-based theory, lonely
people unfavorably compare their social relationships to the networks of others. In a society like ours that places such emphasis on group relations, lonely individuals can be left stigmatized by their own perceived failings and are often unwilling to make any effort to increase their social network (Murphy & Kupshik, 1992). For lonely college students who are daily observers of the large groups of friends in the cafeterias, classes, and organizations on campus, social comparison seems a most appropriate theory.

Bowlby's attachment theory can also apply to loneliness research on college campuses. When threatened, children need to attach themselves to a secure figure, often a parent. College students who are away from their parents for the first time have no such attachment figure to run to in times of stress and loneliness (Bowlby, 1973). Ideally, a roommate could become such an attachment figure.

Beyond theory, several studies have looked specifically at loneliness in college students. At the end of the school year, UCLA students were asked why they had been lonely at the year's beginning. Typical responses for students who were no longer lonely included the absence of family and old friends, having difficulties with schoolwork, and being in an isolated living environment. Interestingly, 11% blamed a friend or roommate for their earlier loneliness. Chronically lonely students cited their own shyness, fears of rejection, and inability to make friends as reasons for their social isolation. These students may have decided early on that they could not
make friends because of their own personal flaws (Cutrona, 1982). A roommate rejection as the cause of this assumption is an interesting possibility.

Developing from the UCLA research, a study by Shaver, Furman, and Buhrmester (1985) looked at both trait and state loneliness. State loneliness is most prevalent in the autumn when social support networks are at their weakest levels. The research reports that students who are unable to develop social networks by the end of the academic year are trait lonely. In fact, trait loneliness correlates to an individual's inability to initiate friendships, the lack of self-disclosure, increased passivity, and the attribution of social rejections to personality traits. Thus, the study suggests that a temporary lack of a strong social network is normal at the beginning of the school year. However, some students are unable to break out of the early isolation created by both college life and their own lack of social skills. These chronically lonely people are often caught in a self-defeating cycle of pessimistic feelings and rejection. Although they report more daily contacts with strangers than non-lonely students do, lonely students perceived themselves and others negatively (W. Jones, 1981; E. Jones, Rhodewell, Berglas, & Skelton, 1981; Wittenberg & Reis, 1986).

For those able to move beyond initial isolation, a strong social support network appears to counteract the earlier feelings of loneliness. In fact, loneliness may be the direct result of a deficient social network (Murphy & Kupshik, 1992). Jones
and Moore (1987) report that there is negative relationship between loneliness and the strength of the social support network. Furthermore, loneliness seems to be linked to more qualitative deficits in the network instead of quantitative deficiencies. Carpenter, Hansson, Rountree, and Jones (1984) report that the amount of available support is less important than an individual's interpretation of whether or not the support is satisfactory.

Several methods exist that measure the strength of an individual's social support network. The Social Network List (Hirsch, 1980) asks subjects to list initials of the people who provide them with support and then asks questions about the quality of each of the listed relationships. Similarly, Sarason et al. (1983) developed the Social Support Questionnaire to discover the quantity of support available to the participant as well as his or her satisfaction with that support.

More specifically, Fischer (1982) breaks down the social support network into three parts—counseling, practicality, and companionship. He argues that a social support system must meet all three needs—counseling on personal matters, practical aid (money, work, etc.), and social companionship (hobbies, social events, etc.)—to be successful. College students must find this kind of support during their first year of college or face feelings of loneliness and social isolation. A good roommate can potentially supply all three of Fischer's social support components.

Obviously, an integral part of most college support networks
involves the relationship between roommates. One study reports that a satisfactorily supportive partner can, in fact, lead to decreased loneliness (de Jong-Gierveld & van Tilburg, 1989). Under ideal circumstances, a roommate can become this supportive partner and confidant. Indeed a roommate relationship is in many ways similar to a marriage with partners sharing a room, food, telephone, time, and cleaning duties as well as a locked-in relationship. Murstein and Azar (1986) predict that roommates behave like married couples because both types of partnerships should provide emotional support. A study by Lozier (1970) focuses on the need for roommates to share common educational goals and to discuss class work.

The value of positive roommate relations has not been neglected in the literature. Roommates often become better friends than non-roommates (Newcomb, 1961; Rubin & Shenker, 1978). The support of such friends has been shown to be critical for dealing effectively with stress, anxiety, and depression (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974; Cozby, 1973; Rubin & Shenker, 1978). A study by Yadusky-Holahan and Holahan (1983) discovered that students who live without roommates are more likely to be depressed and anxious than students who were assigned roommates.

With the importance of roommates well-established in the literature, research shifts to the development of a good roommate relationship. Carey, Hamilton, and Shanklin (1986) created a Roommate Rapport Scale that has shown that perceptions of honesty, sincerity, respect, and altruism are essential to a good roommate environment.
In keeping with the loneliness research that suggests that poor experiences at the beginning of the school year are critical to the continuation of loneliness (Cutrona, 1982), a roommate study by Berg (1984) reports that decisions about the satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a roommate are made early during the school year. First impressions are of the utmost importance in the roommate relationship. Consequently, early failure in this one potential aspect of the network may lead to a fear of rejection in other parts of the network.

This project combined all three variables of loneliness, social support network, and living arrangement in an effort to understand the contributions of roommates in the social support system. Three different types of roommate situations—no roommate, a chosen roommate, and an assigned roommate—were compared by examining the relative importance of the roommate to the non-roommate network. Participants listed either their roommates or a family member with whom they lived plus four other people who were important to them. Roommate and non-roommate scores were calculated based on the participants' answers to the College Network List, a variation of the Social Network List (Hirsch, 1980). These two scores were operationally defined as the social support network. A loneliness score based on the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, et al, 1980) should be negatively correlated to both these roommate and non-roommate scores. The "no roommate" situation should significantly show that the non-roommate scores are inversely related to loneliness. The score of a family member or roommate who was selected by
a subject should be a stronger component of the social network than the score of a randomly assigned roommate. Students who live alone will probably have higher loneliness scores than students with roommates.

Methods

Participants

One hundred and eighteen undergraduate students at The University of Tennessee were asked to take part in this study. Most of the participants were from psychology classes while the remaining participants were students in a sophomore English course. Thirty respondents lived alone. Thirty had roommates assigned by the university. Forty-three students had chosen their roommates, and 15 lived with their parents. All of the participants received nominal course credit.

Materials

The survey found in the Appendix consists of a demographics section, the College Network List, and the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale. The College Network List is fashioned after the Social Network List (Jones & Moore, 1987; Hirsch, 1980). Developed for this project, the College Network List asks participants to list the initials of the four most important people in their lives plus their roommates if they have one or family member if they live with their parents. They will then rate each listed member on a five-point Likert Scale for each of the 14 statements that follow. The survey assesses the counseling, practical, and companionship components of each of the five listed relationships (Fischer, 1982). A roommate
score is calculated from each survey by summing the roommate responses, and a non-roommate score is based on the total scores of the other four people listed on the network. Total social support is calculated by adding the roommate and non-roommate scores together, and satisfaction with support is the sum of the responses to the question about satisfaction (Question 14).

The revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, et al., 1980) was administered after the social support network. This 20-question survey is one of the most popular instruments of loneliness because of its high validity and reliability. Internal consistency is significant with a coefficient alpha of .94. Both concurrent validity with depression and discriminant validity with items like social risk-taking are high. The statements ask about the subjects' perceptions of available friendships and feelings of isolation from others and measure global loneliness without distinction between the trait and state lonely. A single score is calculated from the responses (Russell, et al., 1980).

Design and Procedure

In this project, the correlations (using Pearson's product moment) for the roommate and loneliness scores and for the non-roommate and loneliness scores were compared. The correlations between total social support and loneliness and satisfaction and loneliness were also calculated. A one-way analysis of variance with a Tukey's post hoc comparison was done based on the three possible roommate conditions (no roommate, assigned roommate, selected roommate) in an attempt
to determine if different roommate types led to different levels of loneliness or roommate scores.

**Results**

A summary of the project's results is given in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlates of Loneliness</th>
<th>Loneliness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Roommate Social Support</td>
<td>-.49**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roommate Social Support</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Social Support</td>
<td>-.44**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with Social Support</td>
<td>-.36**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p<.01

Negative correlation between the loneliness scores and the non-roommate scores was significant (p<.01) whereas roommate scores were not related to loneliness. An individual's satisfaction with his or her social support was negatively correlated (p<.01). Total social support was also negatively correlated with loneliness (p<.01).

The one-way analysis of variance revealed that the differences between either the loneliness or roommate scores of the three roommate situations (no roommate, assigned roommate, and chosen roommate) were unreliable.
Discussion

Contrary to the original hypothesis that roommates are critical to counteracting loneliness, the results suggest that support outside the dormitory room is more important than inside. Several possibilities might explain these results. Today's college students are increasingly mobile and less limited to their dormitory rooms. With transportation usually available, social contact beyond the residence hall is possible. Jobs, internships, social clubs, and even the increase in group projects in class all provide opportunities for expanding an individual's social network beyond his or her roommate.

Since the data collection occurred in the spring, the data might also be the result of roommate reassignment at the beginning of the spring semester. At this university, students have the option to change rooms if they have sufficient cause (i.e. a bad roommate situation). Since assigned roommates must stay together until the end of the term, data from the fall semester might be different. In the spring, assigned roommates have to some degree chosen to stay together either because of friendship or indifference.

A third explanation of the data lies within the College Network List itself. Students were asked to list and evaluate their four main sources of social support. Parents and other family members were often chosen for the non-roommate social support. Thus, for college students, firm family relationships are still extremely important and may well override the importance of a roommate.
The survey itself appeared to be reliable. The UCLA Loneliness Scale with its previously reported high validity and reliability continued to have a high alpha of .89 for this data. The College Network List with the non-roommate and roommate scores also had high alphas of .75 and .93 respectively. Item-total correlation was high for both the UCLA Loneliness Scale and the College Network List.

The results also agreed with the previous research of Jones and Moore (1987) that loneliness and social support are negatively correlated. The negative relationship between satisfaction with social support and loneliness was also consistent with earlier studies (Carpenter et al, 1984).

In conclusion, the roommate seems to be relatively unimportant as a check against college loneliness. Therefore, a university's assignment of roommate pairs does not appear to be automatically detrimental. However, a study in the fall semester when students are more likely to be in a bad roommate situation might have different results. Limiting the non-roommate social support to campus contacts only (in contrast to the often listed parents) might also help emphasis the roommate relationship over any other campus friendships.
References


alphabetically versus those assigned according to
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Murstein, B. I., & Azar, J. A. (1986). The relationship of
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Holt.


Perlman, D., & Peplau, L. A. Toward social psychology of
loneliness. In R. Gilmour & S. Duck (Eds.), *Personal
relationships: 3. Personal relationships in disorder*


revised UCLA Loneliness Scale: Concurrent and discriminant
validity evidence. *Journal of Personality and Social
Psychology, 39*, 472-480.


Appendix

This project is being conducted as part of a requirement for the Tennessee Scholars Program. Your participation is purely voluntary, and you are under no obligation to answer any questions that might make you feel uncomfortable. You may withdraw at anytime. All of your responses are anonymous, and there are no risks associated with this project. Your completion of this survey will signify that you have voluntarily agreed to participate in this project. If you have any questions, please call M. Berry at 595-9003. Thank you.

Please circle the appropriate response.

**Sex:** Male Female **Age:**

**Year in School:** Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

**Housing:** University residence hall (Which?__________) Fraternity House

Live with parents Off-campus house or apartment Other

I: live alone. have an assigned roommate. chose my roommate.

live with my parents.

In the first set of blanks below, please list the initials or first names of the four people who are most important in your life right now. If you have a roommate, please list your roommate's initials under Column E. If you live with your family, list the initials of the family member who is most important to you under Column E. If you live alone, leave the last column blank. Then explain your relationship to each of the listed persons (i.e. roommate, friend, boyfriend, classmate, fraternity brother, etc.) and give the approximate length of time that you have known each person. Under each column, score each member of your list with 1-5 for each of the 14 following statements based on how well the statement describes the member.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1--Strongly disagree</th>
<th>2--Mildly disagree</th>
<th>3--Not sure</th>
<th>4--Mildly agree</th>
<th>5--Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Roommate</strong></td>
<td><strong>or family</strong></td>
<td><strong>Column A</strong></td>
<td><strong>Column B</strong></td>
<td><strong>Column C</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Column D</strong></td>
<td><strong>Column E</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Initials**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship to you</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of Relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. I go to this person for advice on personal matters.

2. This person is sincerely interested in me.

(Please do back)
**Key**  
1--Strongly disagree  2--Mildly disagree  3--Not sure  4--Mildly agree  
5--Strongly agree

Please copy initials from front and continue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column A</th>
<th>Column B</th>
<th>Column C</th>
<th>Column D</th>
<th>Column E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initials</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. I could borrow money from this person.

|          |          |          |          |          |

4. We could discuss class work together.

|          |          |          |          |          |

5. This person considers me a friend.

|          |          |          |          |          |

6. We could have an enjoyable meal together.

|          |          |          |          |          |

7. This person is frustrating to me.

|          |          |          |          |          |

8. This person is there for me when I need help.

|          |          |          |          |          |

9. I am unsure of this person's feelings toward me.

|          |          |          |          |          |

10. I see this person as an ally.

|          |          |          |          |          |

11. I trust this person with my secrets and dreams.

|          |          |          |          |          |

12. We could pick and watch a movie together.

|          |          |          |          |          |

13. This person could betray me.

|          |          |          |          |          |

14. I am satisfied with this relationship.

|          |          |          |          |          |
Please indicate how often you feel the way described in each of the following statements. Circle one number for each.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I feel in tune with the people around me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I lack companionship.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. There is no one I can turn to.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I do not feel alone.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I feel part of a group of friends.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I have a lot in common with the people around me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I am no longer close to anyone.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. My interests and ideas are not shared by those around me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I am an outgoing person.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. There are people I feel close to.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I feel left out.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. My social relationships are superficial.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. No one really knows me well.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I feel isolated from others.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I can find companionship when I want it.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. There are people who really understand me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I am unhappy being so withdrawn.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. People are around me but not with me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. There are people I can talk to.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. There are people I can turn to.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thank you for your time and participation in this project.