Coming to College: Correlations between Loneliness, Homesickness and Spiritual Well-Being

By Katherine Grimes

Previous research shows that there is a negative relationship between loneliness and faith, and a positive relationship between loneliness and homesickness. However, research does not show if there is a connection between homesickness and faith. Thirty-nine college freshmen at John Brown University took a survey examining these variables. Pearson-R correlations were done to examine the relationships between the three variables. Results show a significant positive correlation between homesickness and loneliness, but no significant correlations involving spiritual well-being. Discussion includes reasoning for the connection between loneliness and homesickness, and examines reasons why no correlation was found in regards to spirituality.
Coming to college is one of the most exciting changes that any young adult will go through. Students are asked to leave their homes, families, and friends, and to join a new community with different rules, expectations, and opportunities. For many students this transition is fun and exciting, but for others it can be scary and often the emotional baggage of loneliness and homesickness make the first semester of college harder to get through.

Homesickness is fairly common among college students, but it is also fairly short lived (Brewin, Furnham & Howes, 1989). Homesickness, simply put, is a pining for one’s family or friends when not with them. These feelings of loss are a natural reaction to the absence of our family, friends, and familiar surroundings (Archer et al., 1998). However, this does not make it an easy process to go through. Students who suffer from homesickness usually have physical symptoms, greater depression and anxiety, and difficulty with memory and concentration (Van Tilburg, Vingerhoets, Van Heck, & Kirschbaum, 1999). Increased social anxiety and less social support are also predictive of greater levels of homesickness (Urani, Miller, Johnson, and Petzel, 2003). These symptoms can be more or less problematic based on the severity of the homesickness, but even for mild cases these symptoms are not things that can be ignored or dismissed.

Homesickness is also most prominent in younger students who are adjusting to college for the first time (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). These symptoms can dramatically interfere with students’ adjustment to the new environment and can have negative social and academic consequences. Homesickness is also more evident in international students. This is because the differences in culture and surroundings are more pronounced for international students, causing them to miss their families more. (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). The adjustment for international students is larger and the social and academic consequences may also be greater. They have the
challenge of making new friends and adjusting to new cultural and social norms.

Homesickness can manifest itself with more than just simply missing your family. Paul and Brier (2001) found that students who were missing and longing after pre-college friends had low self-esteem regarding their ability to make friends, and the students experienced an increased sense of loneliness.

This increased sense of loneliness seems to logically follow homesickness. De Jong Gierveld (1987) suggests that loneliness is the discrepancy between the social and interpersonal relationships a student has and the relationships that student wants. It is not about the number of relationships, because each person’s needs are different. Rather, students feel lonely when their interpersonal needs are not being met.

Weiss identified two types of loneliness, emotional and social. Social loneliness is often experienced by college age students. When adjusting to college life, some students often find it difficult to make friends. They go through a period when they feel detached from the social network of peers (Netto & Barros, 2003). Emotional loneliness often occurs after the loss of an intimate relationship such as that of a parent and child (Netto & Barros, 2003). It seems that this type of loneliness may manifest itself as homesickness when students go to college. While students do not permanently lose their friends and family, they can suffer from a sudden decrease in communication. When students make the transition to college they lack a friend or companion to share their day to day life with. This lack of intimate friendship can lead to emotional and social loneliness (Roux & Conners, 2001).

Some studies are showing, however, that one way to combat loneliness is through active involvement in religious faith. A recent study by Le Roux (2000) found that there was a significant negative relationship between faith and loneliness. Things such as frequently
praying, attending church, and having a strong faith in Jesus Christ, were all negative predictors of loneliness. Since researchers claim that loneliness is dissatisfaction with the quality and amount of personal relationships it is expected that it would also be correlated with spiritual well-being and activeness of faith. Christians believe when our vertical relationship with Christ is not growing then often our horizontal relationships with those around us will be lacking as well (Le Roux, 1998).

Research has also shown that people who have a greater value for individualism also tend to have a greater sense of loneliness than those who value collectivism (Rokach & Netto, 2005). This is another reason why one would expect more people who are actively involved in a faith based community to report a lesser degree of loneliness because of the importance church puts on collectivism and community. Church involvement also encourages participation in social and organized events which is negatively correlated with loneliness (Netto & Barros, 2003). Researchers have pointed out the need for further research to investigate the connection between faith and loneliness (Roux & Conners, 2001).

While some extensive studies have been done such as the study by Le Roux (2000), several things about the role of faith and religious practices on loneliness, the connection between faith and homesickness or the connection between homesickness as a predictor of loneliness has yet to be established. Our faith is our source of stability and security in this world, and it is expected that students that have a greater understanding of their faith will suffer from loneliness less than students who reject or are apathetic towards practicing their faith (Le Roux, 1998). It seems apparent that loneliness and homesickness have several factors in common; therefore, I hypothesize that students who are homesick will have an increased sense of loneliness. I also hypothesize that students who actively participate in their religious faith will
report less loneliness and homesickness than other students.

Method

Participants

Thirty-nine freshman college students attending John Brown University in Siloam Springs, Arkansas participated in this study. The students were chosen at random from the school email server. There were 16 male and 22 female.

Materials

Students took a survey to measure their level of homesickness, loneliness, and spiritual-well being (Appendix A). The survey considered three separate measures. The first measure is a modified version of the Homesickness Questionnaire (Archer, et al., 1998). The second scale is a short version of the Manual Loneliness Scale (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 1999). The third scale is a spiritual activity and strength of faith survey that was developed for the purpose of this project.

Procedure

The survey was sent to each student’s school provided email address with a link allowing the student to take the survey online. Confidentiality was maintained through the compilation of results. The body of the email contained information informing the participants of the purpose of the study. Once students clicked the link they were taken to the survey that contained the necessary informed consent information. By clicking on the submit button at the end of the survey, the student verified that they are at least 18 years old.

Results

Person-r correlations were done to determine the relationship between the three variables. There was a significant positive correlation between loneliness and homesickness, $r$
There was not a significant correlation between spiritual well-being and homesickness, $r(37)=-0.16$, ns. Also, there was not a significant correlation between spiritual well-being and loneliness, $r(37)=-0.15$, ns.

Discussion

The hypothesis that students who were homesick would have an increased sense of loneliness was supported by this research. However, the hypothesis that there would be a negative correlation between spiritual activity and loneliness was not supported. Likewise, the hypothesis that there would be a negative correlation between spiritual activity and homesickness was not supported.

The significant correlation between loneliness and homesickness is not surprising given the definition of each of these variables. Loneliness is defined here as not having the desired amount of interpersonal relationships. This can be caused by a lack of social connection with peers or loss of intimate personal relationships. Homesickness is defined as a pining for family or friends when not with them. However, it has been shown that the two contributing factors to homesickness are dissatisfaction with one's new environment and attachment to home (Archer, et al. 1998). In this study the focus was more on the student's attachment to home since that has been shown to be the stronger predictor of loneliness.

Looking at the bigger picture some things are clear about the connection between loneliness and homesickness. Students who feel disconnected with the peer group around them are going to feel dissatisfied with their new environment. These students may dwell on the feelings of loss from intimate relationships from home since moving to this new environment. These feelings of loss are going to be stronger with students whose attachment to home is greater, creating an even greater sense of loss. Both loneliness and homesickness appear to
center around this feeling of loss.

Understanding this sense of loss helps those dealing with new college students understand why these feelings have such a wide impact on academic and social functioning. Understanding the connection between these two emotions can lead to an increased ability to help students succeed at college. Groups such as Resident's Life or Student Development need to be able to recognize the symptoms of both loneliness and homesickness and be able to treat both effectively. Because of the connection between homesickness and loneliness, it is possible that a student complaining of homesickness might need more social and interpersonal interaction. Often students who are homesick try and reconnect with home more often. Without a proper balance, a student will spend too much time visiting or talking to people from home and less time investing in friendships at the university, which increases their sense of loneliness. Understanding how to help these students should be a priority within our universities.

One proposed way of helping students suffering from loneliness or homesickness is by getting them more involved in religious activity. However, in this study there were no significant relationship between spiritual activity and these factors. There are several reasons why spiritual well-being was not connected with loneliness or homesickness in this study. It is possible that spiritual activity and loneliness or homesickness are not related, but this is inconsistent with previous research. As demonstrated earlier, LeRoux (1998) found that spiritual activities and faith were associated with decreased levels of loneliness.

Another reason there were insignificant results could be that the survey may not be an accurate measure of spiritual well-being. It is possible that since this study was done in a Christian college setting, the variability of answers among students was great enough to show a significant result. In previous research showing a connection between loneliness and faith, the
sample used was comprised of both Christians and non-Christians. This study was different in that it did not seek to measure a belief in Jesus Christ, so much as it attempted to measure the activeness of that faith. While the reasons are unclear as to why there was not a significant result in regard to spiritual well-being, there are enough possible reasons that future research is necessary before ruling out a connection between spiritual beliefs and loneliness or homesickness.

Future research should be done in this area, because it benefits both Christians and non-Christians. If a connection can be established between faith and loneliness or homesickness in college freshman, then we can develop ways of helping students cope with these issues. There are several areas where further research could be conducted. In general, research should be done with both Christian and non-Christian populations, as well as examining the relationship between other religions and homesickness and loneliness.

Future research should be conducted to see if specific dislike of the university in either an academic or social capacity has an effect on a student's feelings of loneliness. Previous research shows that dissatisfaction with a new environment, such as a university, is related to homesickness and that this association is strong for social dissatisfaction (Archer, et al. 1998). Research should be done to see if the same is true for loneliness.

Future research should explore to what degree loneliness in college students is due to social factors or emotional factors. Previous research has also shown that both social loneliness, not having interpersonal needs met in the present environment, and emotional loneliness, the loss of a former intimate tie, lead to feelings of loss (Netto & Barros, 2003). However, it is undetermined which aspect of loneliness plays a stronger role in college students perception of loneliness.
Loneliness and homesickness have been shown to have several factors in common; however, their association with spiritual activity is still under question. Research in this area is needed to better understand the health and well-being of college students. The more researchers focus on finding connections and solutions to these problems the better able those in the university setting will be able to help students succeed and reach their social and academic potential.
References


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Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* Correlation of levels of homesickness and loneliness

*Figure 2.* Distribution of homesickness scores with higher score indicating greater homesickness

*Figure 3.* Distribution of loneliness scores with higher scores indicating greater loneliness