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Exploring the Interplay Between Loneliness and Self-Esteem:
A Qualitative Study Among Young Adults in the Netherlands

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Abstract

During adolescence, people are at heightened risk of experiencing loneliness, which can lead to several negative consequences, including reduced mental well-being, depressive symptoms, anxiety and lower life satisfaction. This highlights the importance of studying loneliness in young adults. It is theorized that loneliness could motivate lonely individuals to connect with others, but factors such as low self-esteem can hinder socially connecting. Earlier research, mostly quantitative, showed that loneliness can lower self-esteem and low self-esteem can lead to loneliness. This qualitative research adds to existing data by exploring the lived experiences of young adults in the Netherlands; it examines the consequences of loneliness on self-esteem and how low self-esteem affects overcoming loneliness. Data was collected through semi structured, in-depth interviews with 11 participants aged 22 to 27. In line with earlier research, the results show different ways in which loneliness influences self-esteem; loneliness can lead to lower self-esteem in relationships, it can cause people to question their own worth or abilities and it can lead to a need for validation from others. Regarding the influence of low self-esteem on loneliness, low self-esteem was a barrier for some to socially connect because of worrying what others think of them, they were very conscious of themselves and they could avoid contact because of fear of rejection. This study adds to scientific knowledge by providing a detailed description of young adults' experiences. For practice, this study shows that cognitive behavioural therapy could be effective in preventing young adults from getting stuck in prolonged loneliness.

Introduction

Feelings of loneliness among adolescents have increased the past years (Buecker et al., 2021; Köster & Lipps, 2024; Twenge et al., 2021). This is a worrying trend since experiencing loneliness has several negative consequences, such as low mental well-being, depressive symptoms, anxiety and lower life satisfaction (Binte Mohammad Adib & Sabharwal, 2023; Kong & You, 2013; Lyyra et al., 2021; Vanhalst et al., 2011). Focussing specifically on adolescents when researching loneliness is profoundly relevant, since it has been shown that adolescence is a period in life where people are at heightened risk to experience loneliness (Goossens, 2018; Laursen & Hartl, 2013). This is because of the severe changes in their social network during these years, where they distance themselves from their parents and their peers gain more importance. Having the unpleasant feeling of loneliness could be a motivation for lonely individuals to connect with others, because they want to get rid of their unpleasant feeling (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018; Qualter et al., 2015). Unfortunately, there are factors that can stand in the way of socially connecting with others; low self-esteem is one of those factors (Geukens et al., 2022; Qualter et al., 2015). It has been suggested that there could be a vicious circle at play that people can get stuck in, where loneliness lowers self-esteem, lower self-esteem then leads to loneliness, which then lowers self-esteem again (Geukens et al., 2022; Vanhalst et al., 2013).

This current research will focus on the consequences of loneliness on young adults' self-esteem and will also examine the influence of low self-esteem on loneliness, thus on further understanding the vicious circle of loneliness and self-esteem that could be at play. Quantitative research on the link between loneliness and self-esteem shows that there is a negative association between the two, which means that individuals who experience more loneliness have lower self-esteem (Geukens et al., 2022; Kong & You, 2013; Lyyra et al., 2021; Teneva & Lemay, 2020; Vanhalst et al., 2013). Additionally, longitudinal quantitative

research showed that among those whose loneliness increased over time, self-esteem decreased (Geukens et al., 2022; Vanhalst et al., 2013). This current study has a qualitative research design, which can create a deeper understanding of the relationship between loneliness and self-esteem, by exploring the lived experiences of individuals with the use of in-depth interviews. Until now, the theoretical mechanism of why loneliness leads to lower self-esteem often remains unexplained in a lot of studies on loneliness and its effects on self-esteem. The theoretical explanation that is sometimes used to explain the mechanism is by Peplau et al. and dates back to 1982. A more recent theoretical framework, or confirmation that the theory by Peplau et al. from 1982 is still correct, is necessary. The lived experiences of individuals, which will be gathered through in-depth interviews in this study, can add useful information to the knowledge about the underlying mechanism of the effect of loneliness on self-esteem.

The information that the current study will add to the existing literature is valuable for professionals who help young adults who experience loneliness and whose self-esteem is lower than desired. The in-depth interviews in this study can offer new and deeper insights into understanding why individuals' self-esteem decreases as a result of experiencing loneliness. Deeper insights into the mechanism are useful for professionals to help lonely young adults with solving their loneliness and with increasing their self-esteem. Discovering whether the vicious circle of loneliness and self-esteem possibly exists and how this vicious circle works, is likewise necessary. If this study suggests that the vicious circle possibly exists, it is required that lonely young adults get help to higher their self-esteem. If their self-esteem remains low, it may continue to hinder the resolution of loneliness, which could lead to prolonged loneliness.

This current research will answer the questions: *What are the consequences of loneliness on self-esteem among young adults in the Netherlands?* and additionally *What are*

the experiences of young adults in the Netherlands with solving their loneliness if they

experience low self-esteem?

Theory

Loneliness can be described as a negative feeling caused by either a qualitative or quantitative gap between one's desired and their achieved network of social relationships (de Jong-Gierveld et al., 2006; Lyyra et al., 2021; Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Perlman and Peplau (1981) point out that this definition of loneliness has three general points, which are (1) loneliness results from shortcomings in one's social relations; (2) loneliness is a subjective phenomenon, meaning that it is not the same as objective isolation, therefore people can be alone without feeling lonely; and (3) loneliness is unpleasant and distressing. Self-esteem is an individual's subjective evaluation of their worth as a person (Donnellan & Trzesniewski, 2011). Someone has high self-esteem if they believe that they are a person of worth and value.

Loneliness and low self-esteem

Research shows that loneliness leads to lower self-esteem (Geukens et al., 2022; Kong & You, 2013; Lyyra et al., 2021; Teneva & Lemay, 2020; Vanhalst et al., 2013). Most research on the consequences of loneliness for self-esteem that show there is a negative correlation between the two do not further explain the mechanism behind it. In Peplau et al. (1982), several explanations are given for the diminishing influence of loneliness on self-esteem. First of all, loneliness leads to lower self-esteem because the lack of friends or a partner and also having unsatisfying relationships are often seen as social failure. It is explained that the observation of a social deficit decreases self-esteem, because there is a gap between one's personal ideas or aspirations of social connections and the social connections that they have accomplished. The extent to which this perceived failure lowers self-esteem depends on one's causal attributions to the failure (Peplau et al., 1981). If the failure is attributed to external causes (such as feeling lonely because you recently moved to another city), it does not impact self-esteem. If the failure is attributed to lack of effort, it is said to lead to feelings of shame and

guilt, supposedly because the person might have done better if they tried harder. If the failure is attributed to personality or lack of ability, it is said to be associated with feeling incompetent and inadequate, which will be most damaging to self-esteem.

Besides the diminishing effect of loneliness on self-esteem because of perceived social failure, Peplau et al. (1982) explain that loneliness leads to lower self-esteem because our self-conception is largely based on relationships we have with other people. A lack of social relationships can have consequences for self-conception, because many life plans require social relationships. Especially for young people, not having a partner can hinder future goals, such as getting married. To sum up, according to Peplau et al. (1982), loneliness leads to low self-esteem because loneliness is seen as a social failure. Loneliness is especially damaging to self-esteem if the failure to have satisfying relationships is attributed to personality or lack of ability. Loneliness can also lead to lower self-esteem because lack of connections has consequences for our self-view.

Low self-esteem leading to loneliness: the vicious circle

The current research will also focus on the consequences of low self-esteem on loneliness and on the vicious circle between loneliness and low self-esteem that might be at work. The theory by Peplau et al. (1982) on loneliness and self-esteem and more recent research, found that feeling lonely predicts decreases in self-esteem over time and low self-esteem is found to increase loneliness over time (Geukens et al., 2022; Qualter et al., 2015; Vanhalst et al., 2013). Young adults can possibly get stuck in a vicious circle where loneliness lowers their self-esteem, which can lead to loneliness, which, in turn, lowers their self-esteem again, and so on. The Cacioppo Evolutionary Theory of Loneliness (ETL) can be used to further explain why some people can get stuck in a vicious circle of loneliness and low self-esteem.

According to the ETL, loneliness increases the motivation to reconnect (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018). The theory explains that the negative feeling of loneliness alerts a person that their connections are insufficient and it motivates this person to repair or replace the perceived shortages in their social relationships, to find relief from the negative feeling of loneliness (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018). This aspect of the ETL can also be referred to as the reaffiliation motive (Qualter et al., 2015).

However, not everyone who experiences loneliness is able to reconnect with others and consequently alleviate loneliness (Qualter et al., 2013; Qualter et al., 2015). For example, research by Qualter et al. (2013) on loneliness during childhood and adolescence showed that children who had increased risk to be highly and stably lonely across childhood and adolescence had specific cognitive characteristics. These children tended to think that positive things that happened to them, happened because of luck or were out of their control. They also had low self-worth and they were observed by peers and teachers to have low trust in peers.

In adolescents, low self-esteem, anxiety and low levels of trust can disrupt the reaffiliation motive that lonely individuals, according to the ETL, go through to connect with others again to reduce their loneliness (Geukens et al., 2022; Qualter et al., 2015). When the reaffiliation motive is disrupted, it can lead to prolonged loneliness (Qualter et al., 2015). If this information is added up, it can be expected that experiencing loneliness leads to lowered self-esteem, and low self-esteem is a barrier for lonely people to socially (re)connect, thus leading to prolonged loneliness.

Methods

Participants and design

Interviews were held with 11 participants. The participants were between the ages of 22 and 27 and they all lived in the Netherlands. Nine participants were female, one was male and one preferred to not be labelled in terms of gender. Participating was voluntary and the participants did not receive a reward for the interview. The participants were selected using a convenience sample, as the interviewers knew the participants they interviewed. The participants had to live in the Netherlands during their participation and they had to be between 18 and 30 years old. The data was collected through in-depth interviews, using an interview-guide with open-ended questions to guide the interview.

Procedure

Participants were approached in real-life, through group chats on WhatsApp and through a post on social media (Instagram and LinkedIn). If a person responded to the invitation that they were interested in participating in this study, they received an information letter. The information letter provided participants with information about the research topic of the interview: the experiences of loneliness, the influence of loneliness on self-esteem, and if lower self-esteem makes it harder to socially connect. Each participant could choose to be interviewed online via a Teams videocall or face-to-face. The participants who were interviewed face-to-face could choose a location where the interview would take place, to ensure that they felt as comfortable as possible. For example, it could feel uncomfortable for some people to talk about loneliness and their self-esteem in a restaurant, where others can hear.

All participants were interviewed about loneliness, the influence of that on self-esteem and the influence of self-esteem on loneliness. Eight of those participants were besides

interviewed about their childhood and upbringing, to collect data for another research. After those eight interviews were finished, it turned out that most information that was given in all of the interviews was focussed on loneliness at home within the family. This led to the decision to additionally interview three more young adults, to collect extra data on experiences of loneliness that did not happen within the family. The three extra interviews did not include the questions on childhood and upbringing.

The eight interviews that included questions on childhood and upbringing took between 28 minutes and an hour each. The interviews that did not include questions on childhood and upbringing took between 14 and 20 minutes. If the participants were interested in the results of the study, they could share their email address with the interviewer to eventually receive the results of this study.

The interview questions

At the beginning of the interview, the participants were asked some questions about themselves. These questions were about where they currently live, if they live alone or together with others, where they grew up and what their current occupation is. After that, the participants were asked to tell something about a recent situation in which they felt lonely. After that, they were asked to describe the thoughts and feelings they had when they felt lonely.

To find out whether participants' self-esteem was influenced by experienced loneliness, they were asked "What impact do you think your experience of loneliness had on your self-esteem?". To dive deeper into the influence of loneliness on their self-esteem, the participants were asked "How do you feel about yourself when you feel lonely, compared to when you do not feel lonely?" and "Can you describe what thought/beliefs you have about yourself at times when you feel lonely?"

To find out whether they struggled to alleviate their loneliness if they had lower self-esteem, they were asked "In a situation where your self-esteem is lower, what effect does that have on your ability to socially connect?"

Ethics

All participants signed a consent form at the start of the interview. Information about the ethics (privacy, confidentiality, anonymity etc.) was verbally shared with the participants at the start of the interview and that information was included in the consent form they signed. The participants were informed that participation was voluntarily and that they could end their participation at any time if they wanted to, without an explanation or negative consequences. None of the participants ended their participation during the interview. They were also informed that the transcripts of the interviews would be anonymized, so answers could not be linked to the participants and that the transcripts would be stored separately from the interview recordings.

Positionality

The interviewer/researcher of this study on loneliness and self-esteem is a 25 year old female from the Netherlands, who has a background in social sciences and is an interdisciplinary social sciences master student. Own experiences with loneliness and its impact on self-esteem may influence the way she conducts and analyses the interviews with participants. Her own experiences also allowed her to empathize with participants who have experienced loneliness and its impact on their self-esteem. It was acknowledged that the researchers' own experiences with loneliness and lowered self-esteem could colour her perception, which has therefore been kept in mind during data collection and data analysis.

Analysis

The voice recordings were transcribed by the transcription service Good Tape, that turns audio recordings into text. After that, the transcripts were read by the interviewer while the audio played, to check if the transcripts were correct. Incorrect parts of the transcript were adjusted to match the audio. To analyse the data, a combination of deductive and inductive coding was used. Initially, deductive coding was used where codes were created based on existing literature. During the process of analysing the data, inductive coding was used, because it could happen that new themes and codes emerged from the data. The transcripts were coded in Word and the codes and associated quotes from the interviews were saved in a codebook in Excel.

Results

In this section, the consequences of loneliness on self-esteem will firstly be described. When looking at the consequences of loneliness, the situations in which the participants experienced loneliness will be taken into account to discover whether the impact on self-esteem depends on the cause of loneliness. After that, the ways in which lower self-esteem is a barrier to solving loneliness will be described.

The impact of loneliness on self-esteem

The consequences of loneliness on self-esteem experienced by the participants in this study are very diverse. Some participants experienced low self-esteem in their relationships with others, some started to question their personal qualities, and some mentioned that they needed validation from others to feel they were good enough. There were also participants who said their self-esteem was not lowered because of experiences of loneliness. The different consequences on self-esteem will be discussed in separate sections, which will include quotes from the participants and the situation in which the participant felt lonely.

Lower self-esteem in relationships with others

Experiences of loneliness could cause lower self-esteem in the relationships the participants had with other people. Loneliness could cause them to think that no one liked them, that the people around them could easily do without them and that people they know do not think of them. It could even be the case that they questioned whether their own friends really liked them. Participant 3 (female, 24) said that she can experience loneliness when she is with her father's family (her parents divorced when she was young and her father found a new girlfriend and had two children with her). She described: "For example, I would be there, but there would not really be attention paid to me or anything like that. In moments like that I felt

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lonely. I just was not really acknowledged for being there" (participant 3, female, 24). At first, she explained that she had lower self-esteem in the past: "I only experienced that in the past, that I really thought: oh, no one likes me" (participant 3, female, 24). Later in the interview she mentioned she can still have bad moments in which her self-esteem in relation to others is lowered because of the loneliness: "In such a bad moment I can sometimes think: I am replaceable. … People can easily do without me, do not think about me" (participant 3, female, 24). Participant 6 (female, 22) experienced loneliness at home with her family because she said her family did not understand her and that there was no connection with her parents which made/makes it harder to have (deeper) conversations at home. "At home I did feel lonely often, because I did not really feel like there was a connection between me and my parents. … I did not feel heard and when they did talk to me, I did not feel heard" (Participant 6, female, 22). Her self-esteem in relation to others was also affected: "I can now cognitively reason my way out of it, but for a long time it really gave me the feeling that no one actually liked me." (participant 6, female, 22). This participant even questioned whether her own friends really liked her.

> I have felt rejected for a long time, also with friends. If I asked them something, if they said 'no', I felt rejected for a while like: oh, they do not like me at all. They are just friends with me because they think it is sad that otherwise I have no one else (participant 6, female, 22).

Lower self-esteem: feeling like you are not good enough

Another consequence of loneliness on self-esteem was that some participants would question their personal worth and their abilities. Participant 3 (female, 24), which is the same participant who could feel lonely in her father's family and who could feel like others did not

like her, also mentioned that the loneliness could cause her to feel like she was not good enough. "I only experienced that in the past, that I really thought: oh, no one likes me. And I am not good enough" (participant 3, female, 24). As she said, this only happened to her in the past. But after that, she mentioned that it is a pattern from the past and in a weak moment, she can still get triggered when she experiences a situation where she feels lonely. Participant 8 (male, 23) also mentioned feeling like he was not good enough because of the loneliness he experienced after things did not work out with a person he was dating. "So I felt less good about myself. I felt inferior and that I just was not good enough" (Participant 8, male, 23). This participant had also experienced loneliness at home when he was younger, because of tension at home due to his father who could become quite angry when he was stressed.

Lower self-esteem: questioning one's own abilities

Participants in this study could also start doubting their own abilities, which is a sign of lowered self-esteem. Participant 4 (female, 24) experiences loneliness at home with her family, because she feels like she does not match with her family. She feels that her family does not understand her and she can not have a real or deeper conversation with them. This causes her to doubt her abilities when it comes to having conversations with other people she knows and she thinks she lacks knowledge compared to others.

> I have heard from other people, who have conversations with their parents. I just feel a bit uninformed sometimes. Because at home I did not discuss politics or other things at the dinner table, or about the news. … Other people just know so much more. And then I think, oh no, I'm really dumb, I do not know anything. Because I always hear about other people who know even more (participant 4, female, 24).

Participant 3 (female, 24), who felt lonely in her father's family and could feel like others do not like her and she is not good enough, could also feel like she does not have the ability to tell people an enjoyable story. She could have that thought in situations where she felt lonely, even though she was with people around her:

> Then I continue in a bit of a spiral, so to say. That I just think: yes, I understand that they do not think of me, I never have anything nice to say, I do not experience anything anyway. Then I start thinking a bit like that (participant 3, female, 24).

Lower self-esteem: the need for validation from others

Experiencing loneliness can also lead to having a lack of internal validation, which is a sign of low self-esteem. Some people needed validation from other people to feel good about themselves. Participant 8 (male, 23), who experienced loneliness after things did not work out with a person he was dating and felt like he was not good enough, explained that he felt insecure in contact with others and explained he would analyse people to make sure he was good enough: "In contact with people I pulled myself down a lot. Because then I started analysing people to see if I was good enough, so I wanted to feel good enough to interact with those people." (participant 8, male, 23).

No impact on self-esteem

Some of the participants reported that the loneliness they experienced did not influence their self-esteem. This was often the case for those whose loneliness was situational. Participant 2 (female, 24) could feel lonely when someone cancels plans, but that does not influence her self-esteem: "I do not think that (when someone cancels plans) causes me to feel like I am never appreciated by other people" (participant 2, female, 24). Two participants said they

experienced a feeling of loneliness when they moved to a new city and did not know a lot of people in their new hometown yet. Participant 2 (female, 24) experienced loneliness in the evenings in the new city she moved to, because she was alone most evenings. But she did feel connected to fellow students that she would meet during the day at school. She said that loneliness had not lowered her self-esteem.

> That was my first year that I lived in a dormitory in a city where I did not have friends yet who lived there. And during the day at school it was always really fun, just with other students. But the evenings were quite lonely. Because I was almost never with friends. And I was just alone there a lot. That was kind of a lonely period (participant 2, female, 24).

Two other participants said that they had experienced loneliness after their relationship ended. "I think I felt very lonely when I broke up with my previous boyfriend. Because then I fell into a bit of a hole because we had been in a relationship for 4 years" (participant 9, female, 24). Though those two participants separated from their partner, which caused them to feel lonely, they said their self-esteem was not lowered by that lonely situation. It might be the case that if loneliness is situational, and people can point to a specific reason for their loneliness, they can logically reason that loneliness is not because of them as a person. Possibly because of that, they do not doubt their own self-worth, so their self-esteem is not lowered.

Lowered self-esteem as a barrier to solving loneliness
Worrying about what others think of you

Some participants explained that during moments when their self-esteem is lower, they also struggle more to connect with others. One of the reasons they gave was that they would be very conscious of themselves or they would brood about the social interactions they had, which stands in the way to socially connect. Participant 4 (female, 24), who did not feel she had a connection with her parents and did not have a lot of conversations with them, also seems to be conscious of herself, which causes her to struggle to engage in conversations with people: "And if I am not very well-informed, I think: oh yeah, I do not want to ask stupid questions either, so I keep a bit quiet and then I think: what if they laugh at me" (Participant 4, female, 24). Participant 3 (female, 24), who could feel lonely in her father's family, could also struggle to socially connect in moments her self-esteem was low:

> In those moments I am also very aware. Just aware of myself. And then I start worrying about every little thing, I will also remember everything I have said. Every look I have gotten from someone that might have something behind it or something. So that does have a lot of influence on it (on connecting socially) (participant 3, female, 24).

Avoidance caused by lowered self-esteem

Some participants who had lowered self-esteem had a tendency to avoid contact with new people. They could also avoid opening up to people when it comes to feelings, because of the fear to be rejected. Participant 8 (male, 23), who experienced loneliness after things did not work out with a person he was dating, said: "I actually never say it if I like that person, because that is another confrontation that I do not like. What if she says no or something, what is going to happen if I say it?" (Participant 8, male, 23).

You become very careful with people, because I have gained more insight into my past and things that have happened. I had a lot more insight and I did not want to put myself in the position I was in before (participant 8, male, 23).

Participant 4 (female, 24), who did not feel a connection with her parents, stated that she could prefer to avoid contact with new people:

If I had to meet up with a group of people I did not know at all for example. Then I thought that was very scary. Then I think: oh well, if I can skip this, then I think that would be more chill (Participant 4, female, 24).

Loneliness during childhood as barrier to solving loneliness later in life

All participants who reported feeling lonely at home during their childhood, are still careful in contact with others; they are hesitant and they would rather wait and see how things go when it comes to socially connecting. They seem to be careful to prevent getting rejected. Based on the interviews, their struggle to connect with others does not always seem to be caused by lower self-esteem. They are more careful in contact to protect themselves from getting hurt.

Discussion

This study was conducted to gain a deeper understanding into why individuals' self-esteem decreases because of experiencing loneliness, by examining the lived experienced of individuals through in-depth interviews. Besides that, it aimed to examine the lived experiences of young adults with low self-esteem in relation to overcoming loneliness. This study has found that the consequences of loneliness for self-esteem are that some participants had lower self-esteem in their relationships with others, where they could think that the people they knew did not really like them. Some participants could also start thinking they were overall not good enough, some could question their own abilities and some needed validation from others to feel good about themselves. There were also participants whose self-esteem was not lowered because of experiences of loneliness. For the participants with lower self-esteem, their lower self-esteem could act as a barrier to overcoming loneliness. This was because of worrying about what others think of them and some participants explained that they avoided people, or they avoided getting closer to people, because of fear to be rejected.

The consequences of loneliness on self-esteem

Previous studies on loneliness have showed that loneliness leads to lower self-esteem (Geukens et al., 2022; Kong & You, 2013; Lyyra et al., 2021; Teneva & Lemay, 2020; Vanhalst et al., 2013). The current study shows that this is the case for some respondents and was aimed at understanding why and in which ways loneliness could lower self-esteem. Research by Peplau et al. (1982) gave explanations for the negative influence of loneliness on self-esteem. They argued that not having satisfying relationships is seen as a social failure. The participants in this study who had lowered self-esteem because of loneliness, did not mention anything related to feeling like a social failure. Some participants did mention that

loneliness caused them to feel more insecure in relationships and they could doubt their overall worth or their abilities.

Peplau et al. (1981) also argue that the extent to which failure influences self-esteem depends on one's causal attributions to the failure, where attributing the failure to external causes does not impact self-esteem. If the failure is ascribed to personality or lack of ability, it leads to feelings of incompetence and inadequacy, which is most damaging to self-esteem. A similar result is found in this current study. Participants who felt lonely because of external causes, for example because of moving to a new city, did not feel like their loneliness lowered their self-esteem. Additionally, it seems that the participants did not ascribe their loneliness to personality or lack of ability in cases when their loneliness was situational, for example when their romantic relationship ended. This suggests that situational loneliness and loneliness that is attributed to external causes may not lower self-esteem.

Low self-esteem as a barrier to solving loneliness

Earlier research shows that low self-esteem can stand in the way to socially connect (Geukens et al., 2022; Qualter et al., 2015; Vanhalst et al., 2013). The Evolutionary Theory of Loneliness (ETL) explains that loneliness serves as a motivation to reconnect, as reconnecting will help to find relief from the negative feeling of loneliness (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018). But research also shows that, among other things, low self-esteem can hinder the motivation to (re)connect with others (Geukens et al., 2022; Qualter et al., 2015). In this study, some participants who struggled with lower self-esteem also experienced difficulties with socially connecting. Those participants explained that they struggle to connect with others because they worry about what others think of them and are very conscious of themselves, which hinders social interaction, because they would feel scared talking to new people or worry that they would say or have said something wrong, which makes interactions less enjoyable. Some

participants avoided contact with new people or getting closer to people because they feared being rejected. However, some of those participants explained that they are aware of the thought pattern they can have, where a feeling of loneliness causes them to think they are not good enough or that people do not like them. They said because they are aware of this negative thought pattern, and they recognize the pattern of negative thoughts when it occurs, they are able to logically reason that the negative thoughts about themselves which are activated by experiencing loneliness, might be untrue. They are aware that experiencing loneliness or a form of rejection does not necessarily mean that they are not good enough as a person. Because they are aware that these negative thoughts are untrue, their self-esteem is supposedly less harmed. These negative thoughts do not hold them back from connecting with people because they do not fully believe them. This suggests that being aware of automatic negative thought patterns activated by experiencing loneliness can be very helpful.

Previous research suggests that if the motivation to reconnect is hindered, it can lead to prolonged loneliness (Qualter et al., 2015). This could mean that people get stuck in a vicious circle of loneliness and lowered self-esteem, because low self-esteem is a barrier to (re)connect. Participants in this study do not seem to get stuck in this vicious circle. It seems to be the case that recognizing negative thought patterns help in preventing getting stuck in a vicious circle where loneliness leads to lower self-esteem and lower self-esteem then leads to loneliness.

Strengths and implications

The main strength of this research is that the influence of loneliness on self-esteem and the ways in which low self-esteem influences loneliness is studied with a qualitative approach. The influence of loneliness on self-esteem has mainly been studied in quantitative research where the researchers often pay limited attention to the reasons behind why some peoples'

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self-esteem is lowered by experiences of loneliness. The strength of the current study is that the qualitative approach helped examining the lived experiences of the participants and the reasons underlying the influence of loneliness on self-esteem from the participants' perspective. It contributes to scientific knowledge by providing a more detailed description of participants' experiences, which quantitative research often does not offer. It also contributes to scientific knowledge by offering information on the different ways in which loneliness can lower self-esteem, rather than merely stating that loneliness lowers self-esteem overall.

Another strength of this research is that it looks into how low self-esteem can be a barrier to solving loneliness based on lived experiences of the participants, which adds useful information to the possible existence of the vicious circle between loneliness and self-esteem. This vicious circle that might exist is often overlooked in existing studies. The findings in this study uncover information on how the potential vicious circle manifests in the daily lives of individuals. The participants in this study did not seem to get stuck in the vicious circle, which might be because they were aware that loneliness could cause them to automatically think negatively about themselves. Because they were aware that the automatically activated negative thought patterns were untrue, they could actively work to counteract those thought patterns, which possibly helps protecting them from getting stuck in the vicious circle. This finding underscores that cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) could be effective in treating loneliness in young adults. Cognitive restructuring is a technique that is often used in CBT, where dysfunctional cognitions are identified and then challenged (McLeod et al., 2020). Dysfunctional cognitions are in this case the negative thought patterns that are activated by experiencing loneliness. After identifying the dysfunctional cognitions, alternative cognitions are created that do not result in dysfunctional feelings and behaviours, but rather help young adults in coping better with certain situations. CBT should be offered to young adults who experience loneliness, as working on negative thoughts they have about themselves can

prevent them from getting stuck in the vicious circle of loneliness and low self-esteem. A treatment where lonely young adults solely work on increasing social contact might not be enough, because low self-esteem may remain a barrier to solving their struggle with socially connecting.

Limitations

A first limitation of this qualitative study is that some of the respondents were recruited through a social media post seeking participants for interviews about loneliness, upbringing and family. This recruitment possibly influenced the responses of the participants, because the people who responded to the post were probably primed to discuss loneliness specifically in the context of family dynamics. As a result, these respondents mainly spoke about loneliness they experienced in relation to their family, potentially overlooking to mention other situations in which they might have experienced loneliness. It is possible that young adults who experience loneliness because they do not have close friends experience more negative impact of that on self-esteem than people who experience loneliness in their family. That could be the case because peers become more important than parents during adolescence. Therefore, it is recommended for future research on the interplay between loneliness and self-esteem to include young adults with more diverse causes for loneliness. For example more young adults who experience loneliness because they do not have close friends.

Another limitation of this study is that none of the participants mentioned that they have experienced loneliness for a longer period of time. As has been mentioned before in this discussion, it seems to be the case that situational loneliness and loneliness that is attributed to external causes do not lower self-esteem, which is in line with earlier research by Peplau et al. (1981). Experiencing loneliness for a longer period may have more influence on self-esteem. For future research, it would be interesting to examine whether the vicious circle between

loneliness and self-esteem exists for people with prolonged, non-situational loneliness. Studying this can be relevant to solving prolonged loneliness.

A third limitation of this study is that the participants who were recruited were people that the interviewers knew from their personal life. Participants who know the interviewer personally could feel more inclined to give socially desirable answers, so it could influence the answers given in the interview. It has been tried to prevent this by letting each participant know that the interview was about experiences of loneliness and the influence on self-esteem before the interview took place. It can be expected that people who do not feel comfortable talking about loneliness and their self-esteem chose not to participate in this study. To further prevent socially desirable answers, the participants could choose where they wanted the interview to take place and it was clearly explained that the participants would stay anonymous in the study.

Conclusion

This study on loneliness and self-esteem was aimed at answering the questions *What are the consequences of loneliness on self-esteem among young adults in the Netherlands?* and *What are the experiences of young adults in the Netherlands with solving their loneliness if they experience low self-esteem?*. It was found that the consequences of loneliness for self-esteem are that some get insecure in the relationships they have, some question whether they are good enough, some question their abilities and some need validation from others to feel good about themselves. For young adults, low self-esteem can be a barrier to overcoming loneliness, because they can worry about what others think of them and they can avoid people because of fear to be rejected.

This research added information to scientific knowledge about how the potential vicious circle could manifest in the daily lives of young adults, which should be studied

among young adults with prolonged loneliness in future research. Besides, this study suggests

that cognitive behavioural therapy can be helpful for young adults who experience loneliness,

to prevent them from getting stuck in prolonged loneliness.

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