

**A Loop of Loneliness: The Impact of Perceived Parental Relations
on Loneliness in the Interpersonal Relationships of Young Dutch
Adults**



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Abstract

Current interventions targeting loneliness prioritize identifying the social skills young adults are typically lacking in their social interactions, as based on quantitative research. While assessing loneliness quantitatively has advanced the understanding of its severe physical and mental effects, less is known about subjective feelings of loneliness stemming from childhood and the impact they have on adult relationships. Feelings of loneliness often originate from the attachment styles developed during early childhood, influenced by relationships with parents or caregivers (Delgado et al., 2022). Therefore, this research advances our understanding of the onset and maintenance of loneliness by aiming to examine how insecure attachment styles manifest a loop of loneliness as experienced by young Dutch adults in their interpersonal relationships. Insecure attachment is a type of emotional bond between a child and caregiver characterized by instability and lack of trust and can negatively impact an individual's emotional, psychological, and relational-well-being (Delgado et al., 2022). Ten in-depth interviews were conducted amongst Dutch young adults who indicated to have felt lonely within their family during their upbringing. This research got first-hand experiences from those who knew what it entailed to live with feelings of loneliness that manifested during their childhood. This study revealed that the participants who endured this loneliness took on two self-defensive mechanisms in order to avoid social rejection, like feeling unheard or having to ignore emotions in order to function accordingly. Although this research confirms previous findings, it extends these insights by examining behaviors like overanalyzation and compliance that insecure unattached individuals adopt to cope with anticipated rejection.

Introduction

Loneliness is a phenomenon inherent to life and existence; it is an experience everyone encounters at some stage of life. Adolescents have been found to be particularly prone to feelings of loneliness within interpersonal relations (Franssen et al., 2020). Feeling lonely during adolescence does not only increase the risk for depressive symptoms, but can cause eating disorders, academic problems, self-harm, suicidal thoughts or attempted suicide (Hemsberg et al., 2022). While these are severe consequences during any stage of life, the developmental changes within the adolescence phase make it one of the most impactful life stages. Adolescents undergo a combination of physical, emotional and cognitive changes, while the formation of social relationships is central in this phase (Dahl et al., 2018). Loneliness can become an obstacle in the formation of normative social relationships through the development of depression, anxiety and social avoidance (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006).

The origin of feelings of loneliness often lie in the attachment styles adopted by adolescents during their early childhood, stemming from the relationship with their caregivers (Delgado et al., 2022). If youths experience a cold upbringing they will lack social warmth, hence developing insecure attachment styles. As a result, they will seek this social warmth through other social connections than those with their caregivers (Delgado et al., 2022). However, individuals who have experienced a cold upbringing have never learned to communicate warmly themselves, and therefore may adopt a defensive attitude to protect themselves from further social disappointment (Cacioppo et al., 2013). This happens either consciously or unconsciously, as one is following the patterns established by their caregivers. Since this is not seen as the normative way of social interaction within relationships in western societies, others are more likely to keep their distance. As a result, another rejection in social interaction follows and feelings of loneliness are fueled repeatedly, causing a loop of loneliness (Verity et al., 2022).

To prevent loneliness amongst adolescents, and thus depression and anxiety in adult life, it is important to find the cause of loneliness at its roots. The way childhood loneliness subsequently translates into the level of loneliness in adult relationships of grown-up lonely children, has been underrecognized (Lim, 2020). So far, most interventions against loneliness focus on quantifying normative social skills that adolescents lack within interpersonal relationships (Dahlberg, 2007). Although quantitatively measuring loneliness has been helpful for deepening the understanding of its serious physical and mental consequences, the social needs perspective emphasizes the role of subjective feelings of loneliness (Stein & Tuval Mashlach, 2015). This idea revolves around the difference between desired and actual forms of social relationships. According to this view, it is how individuals perceive their social relationships and not the objectively measurable social deficits themselves (Weeks & Asher, 2012). Qualitative research helps to understand how lonely adolescents came to lack these social factors, by exploring their experiences with loneliness. Sønnderby (2013, p.22) underlines that "so much research is focused on quantifying loneliness into a number... loneliness is a subjective experience that will differ from person to person". Understanding how insecure attachment styles manifest feelings of loneliness by looking at the experiences of insecure attached adolescents could help future preventative interventions. Therefore, the research question of this study is: *"How do insecure attachment styles manifest a loop of loneliness as experienced by young Dutch adults in their interpersonal relationships?"*

To answer this question, in-depth interviews were conducted within the Netherlands with young adults between the ages of 20-27 in the Netherlands. The purpose of these interviews was to look at how young adults have perceived their parental relationships while growing up, and how this has impacted loneliness experienced in their current interpersonal relationships. As opposed to children and adolescents, young adults will have the capacity to look back at their

experienced upbringing with regards to their parental relations and are therefore capable to reflect on it.

Theoretical Framework

Conceptualization of loneliness

Loneliness can be defined as “a subjective experience where one perceives a discrepancy between their actual and desired levels of social relationships” (Perlman & Peplau, 1981, p.32). Definitions of loneliness commonly describe the subjective and negative experience of a lack in relationships or connections, as to an objective state of being alone (Heu et al., 2020). Hence, one does not necessarily have to *be* alone, in order to *feel* alone.

The origin of loneliness as a human state of emotional being can be explained by Cacioppo’s evolutionary model (2014). This model posits that in our earliest history as human beings, we survived by bonding and sticking together to provide mutual protection. As a group, humans were more able than individuals to organize hunting and gathering activities, share food, build shelter and protect themselves (Heinrich and Gullone, 2006). Furthermore, living in groups increased the chance to meet mates and reproduce. Cacioppo et al. (2014) explain the pain of loneliness prompted humans to renew social contact, just like the human sense of bitter taste alarmed them for poisonous food. The danger of loneliness motivated humans to reestablish the connections necessary for survival and promote social trust, cohesiveness and collective action (Cacioppo et al., 2014). Hence, loneliness has evolved as a primary need like eating food and drinking water.

Although people have different needs within their social relationships, meeting these needs typically involves interacting positively with others (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Even though one seems to logically follow the other, positive interaction is not self-evident for everyone. This is especially true for people who experienced little to no warmth from their caregivers during their childhood. It causes them to feel unsure about trusting others, since positive interaction was not always reciprocated in the past. It makes them experience social

situations as uncomfortable and potentially dangerous (Cacioppo et al., 2014). Loneliness intensifies the urge to connect with others while increasing sensitivity to potential social threats. This can result in a tendency to prioritize negative social cues, form pessimistic impressions of others, and develop adverse memories of social encounters over time (Cacioppo et al., 2014). When lonely individuals anticipate negative reactions from others, their actions inadvertently confirm these expectations, ultimately driving away those they seek closeness with. Thus, despite feeling like victims of their social circumstances, lonely individuals can actively contribute to their isolation through self-protective behaviors (Ciacoppo et al., 2022). This defense mechanism thus contributes to the loop of loneliness. If this loop has been set forward since the inception of upbringing, one is inclined to distrust everyone, persistently feel insecure, and consequently, experience loneliness, since no other state of being has been taught. Therefore, Cacioppo argues that this mechanism must have its origin in childhood, while being enforced into adolescence.

Adolescence and loneliness

Although loneliness is often seen as a problem specific for the elderly, adolescents experience feelings of loneliness more frequently and intense compared to individuals in other age groups (Hemsberg et al., 2022). Children make friends based on doing things together with those who are close by. As they grow up, the emphasis shifts towards the quality of friendships, sharing feelings and receiving the emotional support of others. This focus on the quality of friendships continues into adolescence and young adulthood, with an increasing urgency on closeness (Qualter et al., 2015).

Adolescence involves a wide range of developmental changes and fundamental learning experiences that happen as one moves from childhood to adulthood. It starts with brain changes, leading to body changes like growth spurts, metabolic shifts, sleep changes, and sexual maturation (Dahl et al., 2018). Hemsberg et al. (2022) mention this state of development as a

reason for adolescent's heightened vulnerability to loneliness. Whereas friendships were first based on companionship in childhood, they transition into roles of emotional support during adolescence (Verity et al, 2022). At the same time, adolescents seek autonomy from their parents during this period, who were the original providers of their emotional support before puberty. As a result, adolescents seek deeper intimacy within their friendships as compared to in their childhood, while still exploring their own identity.

Since adolescents are still exploring the howabouts regarding social relationships as part of their social development, they will naturally run into cold social encounters. While this is part of adolescents' normative learning curve, running into cold social encounters can add to the idea that all social encounters are doomed to disappointment (Verity et al., 2022). When having experienced low levels of parental warmth during childhood and so having developed insecure attachment styles, social conflict can heighten long-lasting feelings of loneliness in adolescents as part of their forming identity, maintaining the loop of loneliness. (Hemsberg et al., 2022).

Attachment theory

The internal attachment style serves as the foundation for internal working models, shaping a child's perception in future relationships (Engels & Meeus, 2003). During adolescent development, internal working models serve as a framework that shapes a child's understanding of their relational world, built upon their past parental experiences (Delgado et al., 2022). Establishing good quality bonds with friends and peers will stimulate positive psychological adjustment.

Attachment theory, as formulated by Bowlby in 1958, is a developmental theory focused on socio-emotional development, to explain the connection between infants and their caregivers (Bowlby, 1958). The basic premise is that a person's sense of security and trust in later stages of life is shaped by their interactions and emotional support provided by their caregivers during

early stages in life. Later, Ainsworth et al. (1978) proposed the first classification of attachment styles that distinguished between secure, insecure ambivalent, and insecure avoidant attachment. Whereas in secure attachment caretakers demonstrate physical and emotional warmth, trust and availability, insecure attachment holds the opposite. Insecure ambivalent attachment arises when the caregiver is inconsistently available; inconsistent in providing warmth and support, non-responsive to crying, as well as low in autonomy support (Ainsworth, 1979; Koehn & Kerns, 2018). Children with insecure ambivalent attachment develop high anxiety, the need for closeness, worry about establishing relationships, and fear of rejection. Because of this, children with insecure ambivalent attachment tend to be more socially isolated. (Ainsworth, 1978; Delgado et al., 2022). Lastly, in insecure avoidant attachment, the caregiver neglects to respond to the infant's signals indicating a need for protection (Ainsworth, 1978). Children with insecure avoidant attachment develop self-sufficiency and a preference for emotional distancing from others. These children expect rejection by others in social relationships and are therefore more likely to be hostile and antisocial with others.

Since the need for an attachment figure is most apparent during infancy and early childhood, most existing research regarding attachment styles is aimed at infants and young children (Bowlby, 1958; Ainsworth, 1978). However, adolescents still require and depend on their caregivers as attachment figures beyond their childhood. Additionally, Weingold (2010) mentions that the way in which adults remember their childhood attachment may be the biggest predictor of their adult attachment and self-understanding. Therefore, if insecure attachment styles are formed during childhood, they will most likely further develop in adolescence, continuing to negatively dominate interpersonal relationships through future life stages. Thus, identifying how insecure attachment styles manifest in adolescence is key in preventing loneliness in future life stages.

Conclusion

In summary, while the human need for social contact has developed as a primary need, Cacioppo's evolutionary model (2014) explains how self-defensive mechanisms regarding social threats came about through human evolution. Understanding the origin of these self-defensive mechanisms becomes particularly crucial as children move into adolescence where the first social bonds based on emotional support are formed, besides those with one's parents. It is the stage of life in which previously formed attachment styles come into play while forming new interpersonal relations, while still learning where one's place on the social ladder is in forming one's identity. While insecure attachment forms the onset of the loop of loneliness, it is precisely the convergence of adolescence as a life stage, one's upbringing and feelings of loneliness that sustain the loop of loneliness.

Methods

Research Design

After literature research a qualitative approach for this study was chosen, because while quantitative research uses statistics to predict how and why people behave under certain conditions, qualitative research focuses on the experiences of those involved (Mellon, 1985). To discover how insecure attachment manifests feelings of loneliness, young Dutch adults were asked to reflect back on their childhood experiences with loneliness, in combination with the role parents played during this process. This way the research got first-hand experiences from those who knew what it entailed to live with feelings of loneliness that manifested during their childhood, as opposed to questionnaires or observations.

In phenomenology it is not about seeking the *factual* truth, but about what individuals experience as *their* truth. Therefore, the interviews made use of the phenomenology method, which focused on the way young adults view the world around them, their perspectives and perceptions in relation to their raising and childhood, with a focal point on loneliness. Phenomenology stresses that “only those who have experienced a phenomenon can communicate this phenomenon to the outside world.” (Mapp, 2008, p. 308). The phenomenon in this study was loneliness as was manifested during one’s upbringing. The research focused on obtaining insights from the perspective of an individual who has lived through the experience of dealing with feelings of loneliness and searched for possible connections between loneliness and attachment styles created during childhood.

Participants and Setting

A series of seven semi-structured in-depth interviews amongst Dutch young adults between 20-27 years old, who experienced feelings of loneliness within their family as adolescents, was conducted. Due to a limited amount of time as part of the curriculum this study

had to be written in, it was not possible to reach theoretical saturation. To gather as much data within the time that was given, it was decided to collaborate with a fellow student. It was determined in advance to conduct at least ten interviews combined. Besides being a realistic number to achieve within the given time, this number allowed the study to examine different experiences with loneliness and attachment styles. Consequently, the seven interviews of this study were supplemented with three interviews conducted by a fellow student who researched how loneliness related to self-confidence. This meant taking the interview guides of both studies into account during the interviews. Thus, this study asked questions about self-confidence, in addition to asking questions about loneliness, parenting and social interaction.

This study aimed to sample Dutch participants between the ages of 18 and 30, both females and males. Participants were found through the interviewer's social networks, since Heu et al. (2021) mention individuals tend to be reluctant to talk about loneliness in an interview situation unless approached through personal contact. Seven participants were yielded through a call on the researcher's personal Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn accounts. The call asked for Dutch participants between the ages of 18-30 who felt lonely within their families during their upbringing and provided background information on the educational program this study was part of. Inclusion criteria were being born, raised and currently living in the Netherlands, both male and female, between the ages of 18-30 who indicated to have felt lonely within their family during childhood. Possible participants who responded to the call who had a close personal relationship to the researcher were excluded to prevent possible bias. After the participants had expressed their interest in participating in the study, they received an information letter by email. The information letter included the estimated duration of the interview, the content of the interview and the procedure regarding personal data.

The call on social media yielded seven participants, of which six were female and one was male. The additional interviews granted by my fellow student were all conducted amongst females. All participants were between 22-27 years old and were Dutch natives. The participants grew up in different parts of the Netherlands and differed in family compositions, and educational backgrounds.

Data Collection

The data was collected offline amongst participants in the Netherlands. The participants were allowed to choose the location of the interview, to ensure the interviewees were as comfortable as possible. It was kept in mind that the location should best be calm and quiet, due to the personal nature of the interview. This resulted in four interviews that were conducted online through Microsoft Teams, two at public coffee houses according to the participants' choosing, two at the participants' home, one at the participant's place of education and one at the participant's place of employment. Written consent was asked before any interview was conducted. All interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes. It was possible for the participants to suggest a break during the interviews, or stop the interview entirely if they wished so. However, no participants used these options.

The audio of the interviews was recorded with a phone and afterwards immediately transported to a personal hard drive and erased from the phone. Subsequently the audio files were transcribed in Microsoft Word and coded in Microsoft Excel. A combination of inductive- and deductive analyses was made. The interviews conducted during this study were deductively analyzed for the principal characteristics of insecure ambivalent attachment and insecure avoidant attachment, as classified by Ainsworth et al. in 1978. These characteristics included self-inefficiency, emotional-distancing, indifference, ignoring a child's cues for protection and anger or anguish for insecure ambivalent attachment. For insecure avoidant attachment these included

anxiety in general, fear of rejection, worry about establishing relationships, and physical or emotional unavailability of the caretaker. The number of times the researcher observed one of these characteristics in the interview transcripts was tallied in a scheme. Although the participants were not selected on any specific characteristics of insecure attachment styles, all participants mentioned the fear of being rejected both in their childhood and in their current daily lives. Furthermore, all the transcripts were inductively coded to identify themes regarding loneliness within parental and interpersonal relationships of the participants throughout their upbringing. The most important themes that were discovered during the inductive analysis included non-responsive emotional behavior by parents, feeling unheard, not being part of the family, functionality over emotions, overanalyzation and pleasing behavior. These themes were compared with the tallied deductive themes within the scheme.

Ethical considerations and interviewer information (positionality)

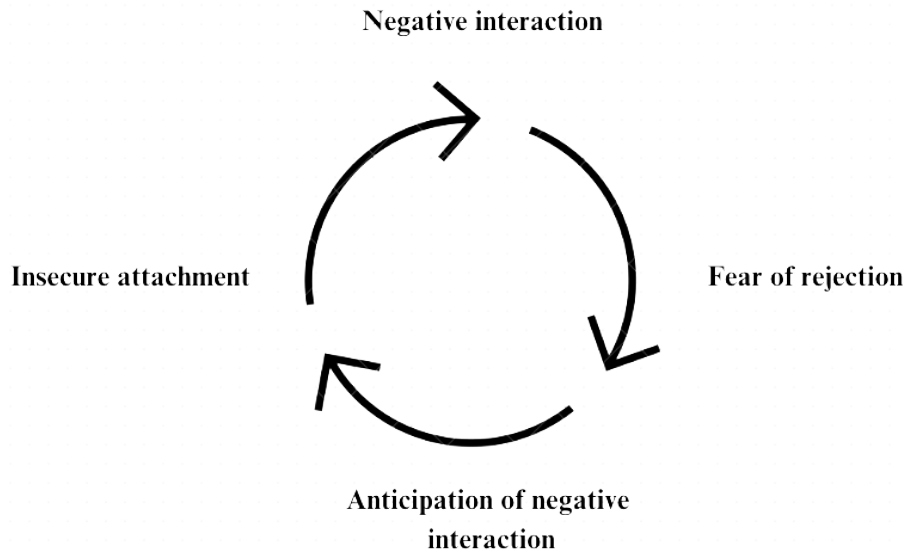
It is essential for reliable qualitative research to reflect on one's research approach, especially in a study dealing with personal information obtained through phenomenological in-depth interviews. By taking part in this research, participants were at risk for re-experiencing feelings of loneliness, by reminiscing memories through the interview. However, this risk was limited by showing participants the interview guide before the interview took place. If at any time during the interview the participant felt mentally unstable or uncomfortable, the participant was able to suggest a break, change the topic or to stop the interview entirely. Since the personal nature of the interviews, all participants were asked how they were doing and whether they had experienced any emotional problems because of the interview, approximately two weeks after the interview had taken place. All participants reported back to be doing fine. To maintain the anonymity of the participants, all interviews were anonymized by numbering each participant with a letter of the alphabet, while other identifying information was erased.

The principal investigator of this study, who conducted and analyzed all interviews, was an interdisciplinary social science master student who was born and raised in the Netherlands. As a woman who had been suffering from a general anxiety disorder due to insecure attachment since her early childhood, she was at risk of re-experiencing feelings of loneliness. Nevertheless, it was felt that sharing a similar experience could help participants feel more comfortable discussing these experiences with her. However, she was aware that this did not mean she knew what the participants were feeling or what they had been through. None of the participants mentioned experiencing a deterioration of their mental state after the interviews, and neither did the principal investigator.

Results

The narrative that emerges from the interviews with the participants of this study is as follows: according to the participants, their insecure attachment styles originate from growing up in emotionally and/or physically unsafe environments from a young age. This includes experiences such as witnessing contentious divorces, financial problems, homelessness and violence. As a result, participants experienced negative interactions in reaction to wanting to discuss their emotions with their parents, and eventually in any situation in distress. Participants felt a non-responsive attitude from their parents towards their emotions as children. Since this is the example of social contact they learned since early childhood, they subsequently expected emotional rejection in every other form of social interaction they encountered in the future. To prevent such rejections, whether consciously or unconsciously, the participants of this study seem to have generally adopted two self-defensive attitudes: they either overanalyze any form of social interaction to avoid another rejection, or have become submissive to others by trying to please them. These attitudes form underlying mechanisms to loneliness, since they carry a form of self-sabotage that keep the loop of loneliness going. Since contact with others is more likely to result in rejection, the participants are left feeling lonely within established relations or when making new contacts. These attitudes create a cycle where insecure attachment hinders the development of healthy relationships and reinforces feelings of loneliness over time. For the participants of this study this reinforces the idea that social contact always leads to rejection and thereby loneliness, making it difficult or impossible for them to form attachments to others. Figure 1 offers an overview of the cycle created where insecure attachment hinders the development of healthy relationships and reinforces feelings of loneliness, that became evident from the data.

Figure 1
Visualization of the loop of Loneliness



Insecure attachment as experienced by Dutch young adults

To understand the onset of the loop of loneliness, namely negative social interaction that comes from insecure attachment, it is important to understand the experiences of the participants of this study surrounding the environments they grew up in. In their research on parental attachment and peer relationships in adolescence, Delgado et al. (2022) discussed insecure attachment as a pattern of relationship behavior that stems from inconsistent, non-responsive, or neglectful caregiving during childhood. In line with their findings, participant C of this study was raised while her parents experienced troubled times financially, while participants F and G both experienced a contested divorce, after which both their fathers ended up stalking their former families. As a result of growing up in stressful environments like these, nine participants pointed out to have felt structurally "*unheard*" by their parents during their entire childhood "*... even if they did talk to me.*"

For the parents of the participants, it often seemed more important the family functioned well practically than that it did emotionally. As participant F, a 22-year-old university student explained “*everything needed to have a function*” for her parents. Two other participants reported similar comments saying their parents were catering to what they needed practically, but were not so available emotionally. Participant B, a student suffering from an eating disorder who currently lives with her parents, described her parents were willing to cover the cost of a psychologist. However, when she came home from her therapy sessions, they still made “*comments that did not help her.*” She mentioned she could cover the costs of therapy herself, but that it is emotional understanding she needed from her parents as opposed to financial aid. Consequently, participant B, together with six other participants, felt “*lonely*” within her family, because “[*she*] *feel[s] no connection to her parents.*”

According to Siegel (1999), the main factor in insecure attachment styles is the emotional communication between a child and their caregiver. Siegel highlights that how parents communicate, through empathy and emotional expression, greatly influences a person's attachment experiences. By feeling unheard, nine out of ten participants of this study indicated that fear of rejection arose from growing up in an environment where their parents took a non-responsive approach to their emotional needs, manifesting in insecure attachment.

All participants indicated that when looking back at their childhood, they realized the lack of responsive behavior to their emotions mainly came from their father, as they were “*intrusive*” and “*narcissistic*” (participant A, F, and I). Although it should be noted that the parents of four participants divorced during their early childhood causing them to mainly grow up with their mothers, it stood out that three of these participants described their father as “*narcissistic*”. Participant A, a 27-year-old university student described there was no room for her emotions as a

child since her father represented himself as “... *a charming person*” while she was “*actually living in his illusion*” so he could “*manipulate everything to his advantage.*”

Participant A continued to explain these patterns of parental behavior had a big influence on her current relationships. She can become “*restless when it is just calm and if there is no argument for a long time*” because she feels “*something is not right.*” Similar examples were seen amongst four other participants of this study. The study by Merz and Jak (2013) on the role of childhood relationships within the parental home, showed stressful childhood memories involving the father likely play a crucial role in encouraging social interactions. Participant D, a 23-year-old man, grew up with his father working overseas. When his father was home, there was “*tension in the air*”, because “*he had a stressful job.*” This caused his father to repeatedly “*lash out at [his] sister and [him]*” by yelling at them if they were not quiet. When looking at his mother for support, participant D explained “*nothing happened... she did not know what to do.*” Consequently, participant D tended to expect such rejections in all other future social interactions.

Stressful childhood environments, lack of trusted figures, and negative events like emotional neglect or violence leads to less positive views of relationships, where either the self or others are seen negatively. This often results in self-defensive behaviors such as overanalyzing any form of social interaction or trying to please others.

Overanalyzing

Delgado et al. (2022) describes that to cope with or prevent anticipated rejection, insecure attached individuals adopt an attitude characterized by insecurity, restlessness, or a desire to please the person they are interacting with. These behaviors are attempts to protect oneself from further negative social interaction, but can ultimately sustain the loop of loneliness. The participants of this study generally showed two behavioral responses as a self-defense mechanism

out of fear of rejection: overanalyzing any form of social interaction or pleasing those who is made contact with.

Five out of ten participants reported to overanalyze any form of social interaction both in the past and present. A common response to the question of how participants approached meeting new people, was that they "*see which way the wind blows*" (participant A, E and J) before making any contact. They rather kept themselves at the background to study the situation and calculate the possible emotional effects of another rejection. This behavior was observed during the interview with participant A, a woman who was raised by two parents who both struggled with alcoholism during her entire childhood, since "*as a child, [she] became very sensitive, constantly scanning the atmosphere to understand what to expect and how to respond if things were not pleasant.*" In addition, participant B anticipated negative interactions, like "*[being] mocked, laughed at and being excluded*" before any interaction had taken place. These responses are in line with the research of Merz and Jak (2013) on the role of childhood relationships within the parental home, that proposed insecure attached individuals will develop negative views regarding interactions with people other than their parents. Past experiences of emotional neglect create a general expectation that others will also be non-responsive. This can lead to a tendency to expect the worst in social situations, even though there are no indicators present pointing to such negative interactions.

When insecurely attached individuals hesitate to make social contact due to anticipated rejection, it makes them less likely to form close relationships. This leads to loneliness, because they miss out on the support and positive experiences that come from positive social interaction. This cycle keeps them feeling lonely, because they do not create the chance for themselves to connect with others and feel supported. A feeling that already has been manifesting since early childhood.

Pleasing others to avoid rejection

A second self-defensive mechanism that was found during the interviews with the participants of this study, was pleasing those who was made contact with. This behavior stemmed from a fear of being rejected, since participants had experienced this repeatedly during their upbringing. By pleasing others, participants tried to protect themselves from other rejections or negative social interactions.

Four participants mentioned to please those who was interacted with. It was observed that these participants indicated that they could no longer avoid social contact when they started high school. As Verity et al. (2022) discovered, this is most likely due to developmental needs, peer influence, emotional and cognitive growth and hormonal changes. Due to the limited time frame this study had to be written in, this was not further investigated.

Since social contact could no longer be avoided, participants tried to please those they came into contact with by “*adapting to every situation and becoming a completely different person*” because they thought “... *[people] wanted [them] to be that way* (Participant F).”

Participant F explains that:

“If your parents do not pay attention to you, eventually you will do anything for a bit of love or attention, because it is a basic human need. Then you will become someone entirely different, just so that at least someone will continue to interact with you.”

The participants of this study were so afraid of being rejected, while desperately longing for a deeper social connection with others, that they did everything they thought the people they were interacting with liked or appreciated, even if it meant sacrificing themselves. This meant participants had “... *a difficult time setting boundaries*” (participant D), because they felt they had “*to be spontaneous... and be able to make small talk*” (participant H), despite feeling

uncomfortable. In their research on evolutionary mechanisms for loneliness, Ciacoppo et al. (2022) found this behavior to eventually become self-destructive. They found loneliness to increase attention to social cues and threats, like hunger heightens focus on finding food. This heightened sensitivity helps protect against dangers, but can make lonely people more likely to perceive social threats. However, during the interviews it was noticed that seven participants indicated they felt lonely within their family, but not a single participant indicated they felt lonely within their interpersonal relationships. Yet, it can be questioned if they did not feel lonely in their interpersonal relationships as well, because seven participants continued to explain how they had lost themselves in adopting behaviors they believed to prevent others from rejecting them, thereby depriving themselves of the opportunity to form attachments with others. Hence, participant J, a 24-year-old student explained often feeling “*replaceable*” during social interaction which brought back memories of not feeling heard during childhood and caused her to observe “*people coming and going from her life.*” These negative social interactions and memories reinforce feelings of loneliness, as Ciacoppo et al. (2022) explain lonely individuals often act in ways that push others away.

Discussion

To answer the question of how insecure attachment styles manifest a loop of loneliness as experienced by young Dutch adults in their interpersonal relationships, in-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted to understand these experiences from their unique point of view. The interviews support previous findings that insecure attachment styles originating from growing up in unsafe physical and/or emotional environments can lead individuals to expect rejection and thereby feel lonely within their families. This makes them adopt self-defensive behaviors to avoid rejection in interpersonal relations, such as overanalyzing social interaction or pleasing others. These self-defensive behaviors keep insecure unattached individuals from creating chances to emotionally connect with others, while bringing back negative memories of social interaction from the past, sustaining a loop of loneliness.

These findings are consistent with previous research and attachment theory as formulated by Bowlby in 1958, because studies (Delgado et al., 2022; Verity et al., 2022) have shown that insecure attachment styles often stem from non-responsive caregiving during childhood. These studies mention that negative social interactions shape negative expectations and behaviors in social contact, leading to difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships. This increases feelings of loneliness, because unattached individuals miss out on the support and benefits that come from positive social interactions. Although in line with previous findings, this study confirms and extends these insights by examining behaviors like overanalyzation and compliance to others that insecure unattached individuals adopt to cope with anticipated rejection. The anticipated rejections that were found in this study were feeling unheard and having to be functional at the expense of being able to feel emotions.

Implications

In this study more insight was gained into self-defensive mechanisms that serve to avoid rejection and thereby loneliness as a consequence of insecure attachment. It seems that the feeling of rejection arises from feeling unheard by caregivers, which stems from overall repeated non-responsive behavior towards emotions by caregivers during upbringing. Since this study examined participants' experiences with loneliness from a phenomenological point of view, it did not seek the factual truth, but the truth as experienced by the participants. This way, it was discovered that even though participants stated they only felt lonely within their families and not within their interpersonal relationships, their experiences with social interaction argued the opposite. This phenomenon would most likely not have emerged from the data if this study had used quantitative methods seeking factual truth, because the participants did not label themselves as lonely in interpersonal relationships, while qualitative research offers the opportunity to read between the lines.

Furthermore, the findings of this study shine light on the onset and maintenance of loneliness amongst young Dutch adults and can contribute to the development of policies and interventions that are responsive to people's lived realities with loneliness. The examples of daily lived experiences with loneliness that were found in this study can help practitioners identify the loop of loneliness more easily. If the loop of loneliness is more identifiable it can help to develop items that can screen for such a loop. Interventions can make use of this knowledge by addressing the onset of loneliness, instead of focusing on tackling the consequences of loneliness in young adults' behavior as they do currently. Thereby loneliness amongst young adults, and emotional problems stemming from loneliness in adult life, could be prevented.

Strengths, limitations and future directions

This research allowed for the unique experiences of lonely unattached individuals to be heard, whereas the participants of this study indicated to have felt structurally unheard since early childhood. Looking into what underlying mechanisms cause non-responsive behavior in caregivers could prevent next generations from entering a loop of loneliness. This would offer a fruitful area for future research. However, giving the participants the opportunity to reflect on their feelings of loneliness, gave this research more insight into how insecure attachment styles manifest a loop of loneliness, as contextual understanding was offered. Despite these strengths, there are limitations to this research that should be mentioned.

One limitation of this study is the fact that it is based on a sample of ten participants. This sample is too small to generalize results outside of the research sample and may not represent the broader population or diversity in experiences. Hence, it could have reduced the external validity of the results of this study and so may not be applicable in populations or contexts outside of the sample. Ensuring a larger sample can help address this limitation and enhance the overall quality of the research. Nevertheless, participants in this research grew up in diverse social environments. They grew up in different parts of the Netherlands, came from diverse family compositions, and had different educational backgrounds. However, it is recognized that future research can gain knowledge by ensuring a larger sample size.

Another limitation of this study is the use of the interviewer's personal contacts to find participants, known as convenience sampling. As previous research suggested (Heu et al., 2021), this method was used to avoid participants from being reluctant to talk about loneliness. Nonetheless, the participants may have withheld certain information for the sake of their relationship with the interviewer or out of shame. This could have caused some topics to not have been addressed during the interviews, even though they were important to the participants.

Nevertheless, how well participants knew the interviewer did not seem to have impacted what they disclosed, since they did not seem to shy away from expressing their feelings. Whether these feelings were positive, negative or overwhelming for the participants themselves or for the interviewer. Regardless, it is encouraged for future research to sample individuals with no personal connection to the interviewer to prevent possible bias.

Conclusion

By asking about the personal experiences of young Dutch adults who know what it entails to experience feelings of loneliness, the following can be concluded: behavioral patterns learned from early childhood within insecure attachment styles lead to loneliness in young adulthood in a self-defensive attempt to avoid rejection. Parental relationships are decisive for interpersonal relationships throughout the rest of one's life. If policy proactively emphasizes secure attachment and provides the tools to do so, emotional suffering caused by loneliness can be prevented.

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Appendix I: Reflection on interdisciplinary

Loneliness that has manifested in the lives of young adults due to insecure attachment is a complex and multifaceted mechanism that manifests in both internal and external problems. To gain a full understanding of human behavior, relationships, parenting and emotional development during the manifestation of loneliness during one's childhood, it was felt that researching this best requires an interdisciplinary approach. However, this research took a more monodisciplinary approach due to a limited time frame.

By taking Bowlby's psychological attachment theory as a starting point, this research mainly found its foundation in psychology, exploring how parental relationships shape interpersonal relations and influence feelings of loneliness in young adults. At the start of this study, it was intended to investigate parenting styles as formulated by Diana Baumrindt in 1991, besides Bowlby's attachment theory. Although it can be argued that the identification of Baumrindt's parenting styles finds its foundation in psychology as well, it was felt this theory could offer more insight into how and why parents take a non-responsive approach in parenting. It was soon discovered that Bowlby's attachment theory and Baumrindt's identification of parenting styles were too complex to cover within this one study, given its timeframe. However, it is still felt further research into the connection between Bowlby's attachment theory and Baumrindt's identification of parenting styles would offer a fruitful area for future research. Looking into what underlying mechanisms cause non-responsive behavior in caregivers could prevent next generations from entering a loop of loneliness. This would add another perspective to feelings of loneliness, besides those who experience these feelings, namely the perspective of parents.

The most important stakeholders to cross boundaries between science and practice to address the onset and maintenance of loneliness through insecure attachment styles, are those

who are feeling lonely as a consequence of insecure attachment during their childhood. It is important to realize that feelings of loneliness develop along with each stage of life. Therefore, this group of stakeholders consists of different age categories, in which loneliness manifests itself differently according to each stage of life. In addition, it is important that this group feels heard, in order for them to express their true feelings and share their experiences. Furthermore, the parents of these lonely individuals are important stakeholders. Since the origins of feelings of loneliness seem to lie with them, they may also offer the solution. It is key to discover why parents adopt a non-responsive attitude towards their children's feelings or why children perceive it this way, in order to prevent the cycle of loneliness from beginning.

Although this study took a monodisciplinary approach, the insights of this study can be used interdisciplinarily. By following a qualitative approach, involving in-depth interviews, an exploration of young adult's personal narratives and their experiences with loneliness was offered. This approach allowed for an understanding of how insecure attachment styles and loneliness are experienced and manifested in interpersonal relationships. These insights can be used in developmental psychology by studying how early attachment experiences influence later development in mental health. Furthermore, social sciences can apply insights of the current research to study how insecure attachment influences family relationships and thereby parenting styles.