CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF LONELINESS

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to examine if Hymel, Tarulli, Hayden Thomson, and Terrell-Deutsch's (1999) three-dimension model of children's loneliness perceptions could be applied in Greece, and to examine age and gender differences in these perceptions. In addition, a more detailed examination of the emotional dimension in the perceptions of loneliness was attempted, based on Parkhurst and Hopmeyer's (1999) hypotheses for the emotions associated with loneliness. One-hundred and eighty 2nd-, 4th-, and 6th-grade children from Athens were interviewed about their understanding and experience of loneliness. Responses fit Hymel et al.'s (1999) model for the perceptions of loneliness, with some additions. Children perceived loneliness as a painful experience with emotional, cognitive, and contextual dimensions. Statistically significant age and gender differences were found in these dimensions, as well as in the loneliness-related emotions. The implications of these findings for the existing theoretical views on loneliness are discussed and suggestions for future research are made.

Key words: Childhood, Emotions, Loneliness.

INTRODUCTION

Loneliness in children and adolescents has begun to attract the attention of researchers two decades ago (for relatively recent reviews of empirical research on loneliness in childhood and adolescence see Asher & Paquette, 2003; Rotenberg & Hymel, 1999). Loneliness is a common, universal human

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experience. When lonely, people experience distress, because they perceive themselves as being alone or isolated, and they evaluate their interpersonal and/or social relationships as deficient, either qualitatively or quantitatively. Also, when lonely, people are motivated to maintain, restore or renew their relationships, they long for contact (for reviews of theoretical approaches of loneliness see Hojat & Crandall, 1987; Peplau & Perlman, 1982). One may experience loneliness even if not physically alone; loneliness is a subjective condition experienced even if others (important or not) are present.

Children's and adolescents' ability to understand the meaning of loneliness has been investigated in a few studies. Even preschool-age children have a valid understanding of loneliness, namely being alone *and* feeling sad (Cassidy & Asher, 1992). In an early study conducted by Demos (1974), 78 six, nine and twelve year-old children were interviewed. Children indicated that they felt lonely in the following situations (the situations were given to them): being alone (i.e., with no one to play with); not alone, but not with the "right" companion (i.e., they miss someone specific); being rejected (i.e., losing a friend, being jilted, hurt feelings, self-pity, punishment, abandonment); being mentally isolated (i.e., traveling alone, illness, secrets, being only one of your kind, e.g., the only girl, or only one awake person); and being bored (i.e., having nothing to do). Twelve year-olds (young adolescents) tended more often than younger children to define loneliness not only as an experience of being alone, isolated and cutoff, but also as the desire for human contact. Moreover, young adolescents, in contrast to six year-old children, seemed to accept loneliness as a normal part of their lives.

Hymel, Tarulli, Hayden Thomson, and Terrell-Deutsch (1999) interviewed 132 children 8-13 years old from a moderate-sized community in Southern Ontario, Canada, about the definition and the causes of loneliness, as well as their personal experiences with it. Children were predominantly Caucasian and from middle-class backgrounds. The qualitative analysis was inspired, as the investigators argued, by the "concept-indicator model" (Strauss, 1987). Responses were regarded as empirical indicators of a concept that is derived from the data. Similarities and differences among the participants' descriptions of loneliness were identified through a continuous comparison among indicators, and conceptual categories of loneliness were finally extracted. The categories underwent further elaboration and differentiation, as they were compared with additional indicators, until the categories achieved the best possible fit

with the data. This analysis revealed three dimensions in the perceptions of loneliness: (a) the *emotional dimension* – loneliness as a painful emotion, associated with sadness and boredom; (b) the *cognitive dimension* – loneliness as the result of certain perceived deficits in interpersonal relationships (i.e., lack of companionship, inclusion, emotional support, affection, reliable alliance, enhancement of worth, and opportunities for nurturance), and (c) the *interpersonal contexts dimension* – loneliness as the result of physical separation (i.e., loss, dislocation, temporary absence) and psychological distancing (i.e., conflict, rejection, broken loyalties, exclusion, being ignored).

Hymel et al. (1999) provided data for gender differences in the interpersonal contexts dimension in another sample of 10-12 year-old children from middle-class urban communities in Ontario, Canada. With the use of the *Loneliness Anticipation Questionnaire* (Terrell-Deutsch, 1991), which was constructed on the basis of the qualitative data presented previously, it was found that children were most likely to experience loneliness in response to conflict and temporary absence. Also, girls were more likely than boys to experience loneliness when confronted with loss, conflict, broken loyalties, rejection, and exclusion. Age differences were not investigated.

Age and gender differences in the understanding of loneliness were examined in an unpublished investigation in the U.S.A. (Bever-Witherby, 1986). Data were gathered with the use of projective measures (i.e., story, picture) and a semi-structured interview about the definition and causes of loneliness, as well as coping with it. School-age children were found to perceive loneliness in the family and the peer context as a specific external experience (i.e., associated with negative social and interpersonal events and situations), and realized that it is an emotional experience. On the contrary, adolescents defined loneliness as an internal subjective experience involving the human need for intimacy, and attributed it to personality traits and internal motives. Also, boys associated loneliness with social situations and reported that they used activities to cope with it, while girls attributed an emotional tone to this concept and reported that they coped with it through intimate interpersonal relationships.

Perceptions of loneliness were the focus of another empirical investigation among third- through eleventh-grade children in the U.S.A. (Spores, 1991). A loneliness reasoning measure was used, containing hypothetical stories in the form of dilemmas that required participants to

reason on the perceived nature and causes of loneliness, as well as on coping strategies and relationship provisions. Selman's (1980) reasoning measure for close friendships was also used. The following stages in the perception of loneliness emerged: (a) temporary physical separation or isolation (in infancy); (b) activity-deprived boredom (in early childhood); (c) equity-deprived interpersonal interaction (in middle childhood); (d) an intimacy-deprivation state or trait (in preadolescence), and (e) distinct societal, interpersonal, and intra-psychic subtypes of loneliness, the latter subtypes referring to lack of personal identity (in adolescence). In general, a Selman-like (Selman, 1980) progression from egocentric thinking in relation to loneliness (e.g., satisfaction of one's own needs) to the awareness of mutuality and intimacy was traced.

A serious attempt to construct a developmental model for the sources of loneliness in childhood and adolescence was made by Parkhurst and Hopmeyer (1999). In this model, age changes are hypothesized to occur in the following domains: (a) *Peer relationships*: attachment to peers (infancy and preschool age); dyadic friendships (early childhood); cliques (middle childhood); crowds and flirtations (late childhood and early adolescence); and romantic relationships (late adolescence and young adulthood). (b) *Valued functions and activities provided by peers*: reassurance, affection, attention and companionship (infancy and preschool age); fun of coordinated play, shared fantasy, deviance, humor and sense of we-ness (early childhood); helping, allying, defending, gossiping and group playing (middle childhood); confiding, sense of belonging, modeling, and sense of worth and identity (late childhood and early adolescence); and identity searching and intimacy (late adolescence and young adulthood). (c) *Cognitions producing loneliness*: being alone in a strange place, wanting affection, getting no attention from others and missing someone (infancy and preschool age); having no one to play with or to be your friend (early childhood); being in conflict with a friend, ostracized, left out, ignored, having no one to go to for help and being maltreated by friends (middle childhood); being betrayed, having no one to confide to, not belonging, lacking group to identify with, and not being valued by others (late childhood and early adolescence); and feeling psychologically distanced, having no one to talk to about philosophical issues, being not understood, feeling a social misfit, lacking or having lost or feeling that one will never find anyone for intimacy (late adolescence and young adulthood). (d) *Related emotions*: fear and distress (infancy and preschool age); boredom

(early childhood); social anxiety, humiliation (from slights, insults, unfair treatment, ridicule, or abuse), shame (because of lack of competence) (middle childhood); shame (because of being unattractive, unlikeable, unacceptable, and unpopular), humiliation (because of felt damage to social standing and loss of face) (late childhood and early adolescence); emptiness and alienation (late adolescence and young adulthood). Parkhurst and Hopmeyer (1999) formulated the above theoretical model based on a review of published literature; they did not gather any empirical data.

This model attempted to explain the sources of loneliness in childhood and adolescence, and not the perceptions of loneliness during the same age periods, as Hymel et al. (1999) did. However, there are similarities between the two models. Similarities exist between the emotional dimension of Hymel et al.'s (1999) model and the loneliness-related emotions of Parkhurst and Hopmeyer's (1999) model. There are also similarities between the cognitive dimension of Hymel et al.'s (1999) model and the presumed cognitions producing loneliness, as well as the valued functions and activities provided by peers (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1999). Finally, similarities are found between the interpersonal contexts dimension of Hymel et al.'s (1999) model and the peer relationships of Parkhurst and Hopmeyer's (1999) model. The fact that Hymel et al. (1999) did not examine the emotional dimension in detail led us to investigate Parkhurst and Hopmeyer's (1999) claims about the loneliness-related emotions in relation to Hymel et al.'s model. This is the only facet of the former model that was examined in the present study.

Aims – Hypotheses

From the literature review, it appears that changes in the perceptions of loneliness from early to late childhood are a highly neglected research issue. Data on these changes would be very useful in the construction of a developmental model of the perceptions of loneliness. Also, age and gender differences in children's perceptions of loneliness have not been systematically examined.

Consequently, the aims of this study were the following: First, to examine if Hymel et al.'s (1999) comprehensive, multidimensional and data-based model of children's perceptions of loneliness is replicated with Greek children; for this reason the study was focused on the various facets of loneliness children in Greece refer to. Second, to trace the possible age and gender differences in

children's perceptions of loneliness and to integrate these differences in Hymel et al.'s (1999) model. Finally, to test Parkhurst and Hopmeyer's (1999) predictions about the emotions related to loneliness, as well as age and gender differences in them.

Since there is no previous research with Greek children indicating differences in their perceptions of loneliness, the multidimensional model of loneliness (Hymel et al., 1999) was expected to describe Greek children's responses too (Hypothesis 1). The hypothesized by Parkhurst and Hopmeyer (1999) trajectory of loneliness-related emotions (described previously) from fear and distress to more "social" emotions (e.g., social anxiety, shame, humiliation), and from there to more complex emotional states (e.g., emptiness and alienation) was also expected to be present in Greek children's loneliness perceptions, when comparing early to middle and to late childhood (Hypothesis 2). As regards the cognitive and interpersonal contexts dimensions of Hymel et al.'s (1999) model, a decrease in children's cognitions relating aloneness and loneliness, and an increase in the frequency of children's perceptions of certain deficits in interpersonal and social relationships was expected (Hypothesis 3), on the basis of previous research findings by Bever-Witherby (1986), Demos (1974) and Spores (1991), as well as of Parkhurst and Hopmeyer's (1999) assumptions about cognitions producing loneliness. Finally, girls were expected to be more able than same-age boys to perceive and articulate more aspects of the loneliness experience (Hypothesis 4), due to the stronger emphasis they place on interpersonal relationships and the related emotional states (Block, 1983; Gilligan, 1982).

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 180 children, 60 from 2nd grade (M = 7.7 years, SD = .78), 60 from 4th grade (M = 9.7 years, SD = .70), and 60 from 6th grade (M = 11.6 years, SD = .84) from public primary schools of Athens, Greece. Of them, 90 were boys and 90 were girls. In each grade 30 were boys and 30 were girls. Ten schools participated in the study. The schools were randomly selected, with the use of random selection process, from the catalogue of schools provided by the Ministry of Education. From each school 18 children were randomly selected with the use of their numbers in

the class roster. All children agreed to participate. Children were located in areas with families of middle and lower-middle socioeconomic status.

Measures

Individual interviews were conducted as part of a larger research program on school-age children's loneliness. The interview consisted of 40 questions constructed on the basis of the work of Bever-Witherby (1986) and Hymel et al. (1999), as well as of two pilot studies with school-age Greek children (Galanaki, 2000; Galanaki & Besevegis, 1996). The questions referred to children's perceptions of loneliness in general as well as of their personal loneliness and its causes. They were very similar to the one used by Hymel et al. (1999). (Other portions of this research program are presented in Galanaki, 2004a, b.) The following five questions were relevant to the aims of this study: (a) What does loneliness mean? (b) When does a kid feel lonely? (c) What things make a kid feel lonely? (d) When do you feel lonely? (e) What things make you feel lonely? Children were prompted when they gave very brief answers with phrases such as "And what else?", "Would you like to tell me more about that?", etc.

Procedure

Individual interviews were conducted by the researcher and ten graduate students who received special training in conducting interviews and practised their skills under the author's supervision in one of the pilot studies (Galanaki, 2000). The participants were informed that they would take part in a study about loneliness, and that their opinions would be very important in helping the researchers understand what children know and how they feel about loneliness. They were assured about the confidentiality of their responses. The participants' responses were recorded in written form as exactly and in detail as possible. Before beginning the interview, the interviewers attempted to establish a friendly and comfortable atmosphere, by getting to know the students and their interests. Children's birth dates were drawn from the school records.

Data coding

Children's responses were independently coded by the author and a graduate student. Hymel et al.'s (1999) dimensions were used as

predetermined categories into which the responses of the participants were classified; this classification was done on the basis of the content of categories described by Hymel et al. (1999). Hymel et al. (1999) provided very detailed descriptions of their categories. The emotions contributing to loneliness, as described by Parkhurst and Hopmeyer (1999), were also used as predetermined categories for the classification of the Greek data.

Some additional categories, based on responses different from the ones classified in the predetermined categories, as well as some new aspects in the content of the predetermined categories emerged from the Greek data. The additional categories emerged from a two-step process. First, children's responses were classified in categories on the basis of the content of the responses, and labels were derived to reflect the emergent categories (e.g., helplessness, social anxiety-shyness, material support-security, restriction; examples are given in pp. 5-8). The second step entailed a reverse process: the identified new categories were used as a basis for the reclassification of the responses, and some modifications were made in order to achieve the best possible fit between the data and the new categories. Interrater agreement for all categorization ranged from 78% to 89%. Where there was a disagreement, a discussion followed until the coders arrived at a consensus.

Children's responses in all five questions (i.e., in perceptions of both loneliness in general and personal loneliness) were collapsed and coded together, as was done by Hymel et al. (1999).

RESULTS

Dimensions in the perceptions of loneliness

In general, the three dimensions described by Hymel et al. (1999) were also identified in the responses of children. Yet, in the Greek sample, there were some additional findings which enrich and extend those dimensions. Age and gender differences in these dimensions are also presented. The three dimensions are described below.

Emotional dimension. As shown in Table 1, emotion terms, such as "I feel", "feeling", "emotion", were used by nearly one-third of the total sample in the definition of loneliness (i.e., as a response to the first question "What does loneliness mean?"). Sixth graders used these terms

significantly more often than younger children. Sadness (i.e., "sadness", "sorrow", "grief", "pain", in children's words) is the prevalent emotion accompanying loneliness in all three grade levels, followed by shame-unpopular (i.e., because of being unattractive, unlikeable, unacceptable, and unpopular), boredom (e.g., "having nothing to do"), humiliation-slights (i.e., because of slights, insults, unfair treatment, ridicule, abuse), distress (e.g., "feeling bad"), and humiliation-damage to social standing (i.e., because of felt damage to social standing or loss of face).

Significant increases with age emerged in some cases (see Table 1). The following emotions were reported more frequently by older children: boredom, anhedonia (i.e., loss of or diminished interest and pleasure in activities; e.g., "not in the mood to do anything"), helplessness (e.g., "feeling that no one can help you"), shame-lack of competence (i.e., because of lack of competence in areas valued by peers), humiliation-slights, lack of understanding (e.g., "feeling that no one can really understand you"), emptiness (e.g., "feeling empty inside"), alienation (e.g., "feeling like a stranger, far from people, even when you are close to them"), and madness (children used exactly this term). There were also some nonsignificant increasing trends for depression-melancholia (children used exactly these terms), anger (children used exactly this term), social anxiety-shyness (some children used the terms anxiety and shyness, some other children used phrases such as e.g., "when with other people the kid is at a loss"), humiliation-damage to social standing, and nostalgia (i.e., the longing for the past, the happy first years of childhood; e.g., "the kid misses his old friends"). However, a possibly curvilinear trend was traced in the frequency of emotion terms such as fear, boredom, anhedonia, helplessness, shame-lack of competence, and humiliation-slights: fourth graders reported these emotions less often than second and sixth graders. A significant decrease with age was found for fear. Girls reported emotion terms, as well as depression-melancholia, and humiliation-damage to social standing, more frequently than boys.

The metaphorical terms or expressions found by Hymel et al. (1999) were very frequent in Greek children's responses too. For example, "It's like you're in the dark", "You feel you're the only one on earth", "It's like you don't exist", "It's like you walk in the desert for hours and you cannot escape from the sand", "Feeling empty", etc.

Cognitive dimension. Children rated the quantity and quality of their interpersonal relationships and stated that lonely children have one or

Table 1. *Percentages of the emotional dimension categories in the children's perception of loneliness as a function of grade, gender, and for the whole sample*

| Emotional dimension | Grade | | | | | Gender | | | | Total |
	2nd (n = 60)	4th (n = 60)	6th (n = 60)	χ^2	p	Boys (n = 90)	Girls (n = 90)	χ^2	p	(N = 180)
Emotion terms	28.3	5.0	58.3	$(2, N = 180) = 40.42$	.000	22.2	38.9	$(1, N = 180) = 5.132$	.023	30.6
Sadness	93.3	93.3	100.0	$(2, N = 180) = 4.19$	ns	92.2	98.9	$(1, N = 180) = 3.270$	ns	95.6
Fear	43.3	6.7	16.7	$(2, N = 180) = 24.94$	.000	23.3	21.1	$(1, N = 180) = .03$	ns	22.2
Distress	53.3	38.3	33.3	$(2, N = 180) = 5.35$	ns	35.6	47.8	$(1, N = 180) = 2.29$	ns	41.7
Boredom	45.0	33.3	58.3	$(2, N = 180) = 7.57$	.023	44.4	46.7	$(1, N = 180) = .02$	ns	45.6
Anhedonia*	13.3	5.0	25.0	$(2, N = 180) = 9.80$	.007	15.6	13.3	$(1, N = 180) = .04$	ns	14.4
Helplessness*	10.0	8.3	31.7	$(2, N = 180) = 14.64$	.001	15.6	17.8	$(1, N = 180) = .04$	ns	16.7
Depression*–Melancholia*	3.3	6.7	11.7	$(2, N = 180) = 3.15$	ns	2.2	12.2	$(1, N = 180) = 5.31$	.018	7.2
Anger*	3.3	11.7	15.0	$(2, N = 180) = 4.81$	ns	10.0	10.0	$(1, N = 180) = .00$	ns	10.0
Jealousy*	6.7	1.7	1.7	$(2, N = 180) = 3.10$	ns	2.2	4.4	$(1, N = 180) = .17$	ns	3.3
Social anxiety–Shyness*	5.0	3.3	13.3	$(2, N = 180) = 5.14$	ns	6.7	7.8	$(1, N = 180) = .00$	ns	7.2
Shame-lack of competence	11.7	3.3	21.7	$(2, N = 180) = 9.42$	.009	14.4	10.0	$(1, N = 180) = .47$	ns	12.2
Humiliation-slights	48.3	30.0	51.7	$(2, N = 180) = 6.65$	.036	37.8	48.9	$(1, N = 180) = 1.83$	ns	43.3
Shame-unpopular	60.0	68.3	61.7	$(2, N = 180) = 1.00$	ns	62.2	64.4	$(1, N = 180) = .02$	ns	63.3
Humiliation-damage to social standing	31.7	41.7	48.3	$(2, N = 180) = 3.50$	ns	31.1	50.0	$(1, N = 180) = 5.89$	.015	40.6
Nostalgia*	--	--	3.3	$(2, N = 180) = 4.04$	ns	1.1	1.1	$(1, N = 180) = .00$	ns	1.1
Lack of understanding	--	--	13.3	$(2, N = 180) = 16.74$	.000	5.6	3.3	$(1, N = 180) = .13$	ns	4.4
Emptiness	--	1.7	10.0	$(2, N = 180) = 9.22$	.010	1.1	6.7	$(1, N = 180) = 2.38$	ns	3.9
Alienation	--	1.7	23.3	$(2, N = 180) = 26.62$	.000	8.9	7.8	$(1, N = 180) = .00$	ns	8.3
Madness*	--	--	5.0	$(2, N = 180) = 6.10$	.047	1.1	2.2	$(1, N = 180) = .000$	ns	1.7

Note: Percentages are based on children's answers as a whole. * New category; not identified by Parkhurst and Hopmeyer (1999).

more deficits in the following eight relational provisions based on Weiss's (1974) theoretical views: companionship, inclusion, material support-security, emotional support, affection, reliable alliance, enhancement of worth, and opportunities for nurturance (see Table 2). Of them, one was not identified by Hymel et al. (1999), that is, material support-security.

Companionship. It is the absence of a companion (sibling, peer) for a common activity (e.g., play, discussion, reading), frequently accompanied by boredom. For example, "You don't have anyone to play or to discuss with". In other cases, a companion may exist but he or she is not available at the time. As shown in Table 2, the majority of children (85%) reported this deficit. There was a statistically significant increase of this percentage with age.

Inclusion. The child does not belong to a group, that is, s/he is excluded or not accepted. For example, "You're left out by other kids", "They don't want to play with you". Table 2 indicates that one third (33.3%) of the participants reported inclusion. There was a significant increase of this percentage with age.

Material support-security. This relational provision was not identified by Hymel et al. (1999). It has the meaning of being alone or deserted and, therefore, basic biological needs (e.g., food, water, clothing, shelter, health protection) and the need for security are not met by caregivers and/or through the relationships. This situation is often accompanied by helplessness. For example, "The kid doesn't have shoes to go out and play", "The kid is poor and doesn't have toys to play with". Table 2 shows that 22.8% of the children reported this deficit. There was no significant age or gender difference.

Emotional support: There is nobody available (e.g., parents, siblings, peers) to discuss your problems, to comfort and help you, or there is an available person but s/he does not offer adequate support. Also, opportunities for self-disclosure are reduced. *Self-disclosure* was not explicitly identified by Hymel et al. (1999). For example: "There is no one to share your problemsœ. Another aspect of emotional support (not identified by Hymel et al., 1999) is *guidance*, mainly from parents, especially in stressful situations. A third aspect not identified by Hymel et al. (1999) is the *lack of understanding* and the incapacity for real communication with other people, which is reported only by sixth graders. For example, "No one seems to understand you", "You want to communicate with others, but you cannot". Nearly one-third (27.8%) of the

Table 2. Percentages of the cognitive dimension categories in the children's perception of loneliness as a function of grade, gender, and for the whole sample

Cognitive dimension	Grade					Gender				Total
	2nd (n = 60)	4th (n = 60)	6th (n = 60)	χ^2	p	Boys (n = 90)	Girls (n = 90)	χ^2	p	(N = 180)
Companionship	78.3	81.7	95.0	(2, N = 180) = 7.32	.026	82.2	87.8	(1, N = 180) = .70	ns	85.0
Inclusion	18.3	36.7	45.0	(2, N = 180) = 10.05	.007	32.2	34.4	(1, N = 180) = .02	ns	33.3
Material support* – Security*	31.7	15.0	21.7	(2, N = 180) = 4.81	ns	27.8	17.8	(1, N = 180) = 2.02	ns	22.8
Emotional support	18.3	21.7	43.3	(2, N = 180) = 11.02	.004	23.3	32.2	(1, N = 180) = 1.36	ns	27.8
Affection	15.0	21.7	20.0	(2, N = 180) = .94	ns	20.0	17.8	(1, N = 180) = .04	ns	18.9
Reliable alliance	1.7	10.0	30.0	(2, N = 180) = 21.27	.000	10.0	17.8	(1, N = 180) = 1.67	ns	13.9
Enhancement of worth	36.7	30.0	31.7	(2, N = 180) = .66	ns	21.1	44.4	(1, N = 180) = 10.08	.001	32.8
Opportunities for nurturance	1.7	1.7	3.3	(2, N = 180) = .51	ns	0	4.4	(1, N = 180) = 2.30	ns	2.2

Note: Percentages are based on children's answers as a whole. * New category; not identified by Hymel et al. (1999).

sample reported emotional support (see Table 2). There was a significant increase of this percentage with age, but no significant gender difference.

Affection. There is nobody to love you and be tender to you. Instead, important others (parents, teachers) reprimand or punish you. For example, "Parents don't love the kid; they often punish him". As shown in Table 2, 18.9% of the participants reported this deficit. There was no significant age or gender difference.

Reliable alliance: Friends are not reliable, available, and trustworthy, they easily betray their friend, they are unjust and have ulterior motives. Relatives (parents, siblings) do not offer stable, consistent, and predictable help. For example, "Friends tell your secrets to other kids", "Friends use you". As can be seen in Table 2, 13.9% of the children reported deficits in reliable alliance. There was a statistically significant increase of this percentage with age, but no statistically significant gender difference.

Enhancement of worth. Personal worth (e.g., academic competence, social skills, social status, outer appearance) is not acknowledged through the relationship. Hence, children associated loneliness with lack of support of one's self-esteem. A sense of social comparison, shame, and humiliation (not identified by Hymel et al., 1999) accompanied this deficit. For example, "Feeling nothing, worthless", "Your classmates don't respect you". Nearly one-third (32.8%) of the sample reported this deficit. There was no significant age difference, but girls reported enhancement of worth significantly more often than boys (see Table 2).

Opportunities for nurturance. You do not have the opportunity to offer nurturance through the relationship (e.g., with younger siblings, friends, pets). The sense of being needed and of a purpose for which it is worth living is absent. For example, "You don't have a little sister to hold her", "When my best friend goes away, I feel it. I feel as if I'm her mother, and my child is away, and I have to take care of her". Table 2 indicates that 2.2% of the sample reported this deficit. There was no significant age or gender difference.

Interpersonal contexts dimension. Children associated loneliness with the two most important interpersonal contexts in their lives, namely the family and the peer group, and referred both to the emotional and the cognitive dimensions of loneliness (see Table 3). The distinction made by Hymel et al. (1999) between physical separation and psychological distancing fits the answers of the Greek children too.

Table 3. *Percentages of the interpersonal contexts dimension categories in the children's perception of loneliness as a function of grade, gender, and for the whole sample*

| Interpersonal contexts dimension | Grade | | | | | Gender | | | | Total |
| | 2nd | 4th | 6th | χ^2 | p | Boys | Girls | χ^2 | p | |
	(n = 60)	(n = 60)	(n = 60)			(n = 90)	(n = 90)			(N = 180)
Physical separation										
Loss	43.3	40.0	41.7	(2, N = 180) = .137	ns	40.0	43.3	(1, N = 180) = .091	ns	41.7
Dislocation	6.7	11.7	10.0	(2, N = 180) = .909	ns	10.0	8.9	(1, N = 180) = .000	ns	9.4
Temporary absence	85.0	65.0	70.0	(2, N = 180) = 6.648	.036	78.9	67.8	(1, N = 180) = 2.301	ns	73.3
Restriction*	13.3	20.0	35.0	(2, N = 180) = 8.401	.015	30.0	15.6	(1, N = 180) = 4.548	.016	22.8
Psychological distancing										
Conflict	23.3	33.3	53.3	(2, N = 180) = 12.057	.002	28.9	44.4	(1, N = 180) = 4.043	.044	36.7
Rejection – Abandonment*	51.7	48.3	56.7	(2, N = 180) = .846	ns	47.8	56.7	(1, N = 180) = 1.091	ns	52.2
Broken loyalties	8.3	21.7	20.0	(2, N = 180) = 5.015	ns	11.1	22.2	(1, N = 180) = 3.240	ns	16.7
Exclusion	46.7	36.7	45.0	(2, N = 180) = 1.407	ns	44.4	41.1	(1, N = 180) = .091	ns	42.8
Being ignored	13.3	23.3	51.7	(2, N = 180) = 22.838	.000	26.7	32.2	(1, N = 180) = .428	ns	29.4

Note: Percentages are based on children's answers as a whole. * New category; not identified by Hymel et al. (1999).

Physical separation. It includes the following four interpersonal situations: loss, dislocation, temporary absence, and restriction.

Loss. It is the loss of proximity to important others (i.e., humans and pets) with whom the child had developed positive, secure relations. There may be an irrecoverable loss (e.g., death of a parent, or a child), a threat of loss (e.g., parents' disease), or the relationship may be seriously damaged (e.g., parents' divorce, a friend's moving out). Even the loss of an inanimate object (usually a toy) can cause loneliness in the child (this aspect was not identified by Hymel et al., 1999). Children mentioned deficits in affection, companionship, material support-security, and opportunities for nurturance. As shown in Table 3, slightly less than the one-half (41.7%) of the sample reported loss. There was no significant age or gender difference.

Dislocation. The child moves from a familiar interpersonal context (e.g., school, neighborhood, country) to another, unfamiliar one. Dislocation is also perceived as the entrance to school (kindergarten, first grade), or to a new age period (e.g., adolescence). It implies the loss of a significant other, the attempt to enter into a preexisting social group, and the awareness that a new equilibrium will be achieved after a period of adaptation. This awareness makes the difference between loss and dislocation. Reported deficits are in companionship, inclusion, material support-security, and emotional support. As Table 3 shows, 9.9% of the children reported dislocation. There was no significant age or gender difference.

Temporary absence. It is the temporary separation from significant others (e.g., parents, siblings, grandparents, peers), and is accompanied by fear or boredom. Fear is mainly fear of separation from parents (e.g., fear that something bad will happen to them, that a stranger will enter the house, that the child may be kidnapped from strangers). For example, "Your parents have gone out and you're home alone", "You fear that your mother will get hurt". Possible causes of temporary absence are parents' job, journey, going out for shopping, sleeping, etc. Another finding, which was not identified by Hymel et al. (1999), was the fear of darkness and the fear of being lost when others are absent. For example, "You're lost somewhere, you tremble and you feel lonely". Children mentioned deficits in companionship and material support-security. A very large percentage (73.3%) of the children reported temporary absence, as can be seen in Table 3. There was a significant decrease of this percentage with age.

Restriction. This situation was not reported by Hymel et al. (1999). It is the involuntary restriction of the child, usually in a narrow place (e.g., room,

home), where there is nobody else, or where there are some important others but they are unavailable or inappropriate companions. It was often accompanied by the children's statement that they were not allowed to go out, although they wanted to. This restriction may also be a form of punishment from parents. It occurs due to safety reasons, bad weather, sickness of the child, homework, etc. For example: "A kid is kept in his room and his parents don't let him go out and play", "There is not enough room in my home for me to play". As shown in Table 3, 22.8% of the sample reported restriction. There was a statistically significant increase of this percentage with age, and boys reported this situation significantly more often than girls (see Table 3).

Psychological distancing. It includes the following five interpersonal situations: conflict, rejection-abandonment, broken loyalties, exclusion, and being ignored.

Conflict. The child is in conflict with his or her parents, siblings or peers. For example: "The kid argues with her friends". In some cases, it is a bidirectional situation, and in some other cases, it is punishment from parents. Conflicts with friends may result in friendship termination, or escalate in a conflict between the child and the whole peer group, in which the child feels that "everyone is against him or her". Sixth graders mentioned conflicts with parents that center around the child's struggle for independence. Some students also reported that the conflict may be between their parents, or among their siblings or peers (these two latter findings were not found by Hymel et al., 1999). Conflict was often accompanied by perceived deficits in companionship, inclusion, and affection. About one-third (36.7%) of the sample reported conflict. There was a significant increase of this percentage with age, and girls reported this situation significantly more often than boys (see Table 3).

Rejection-abandonment. It is the verbal and/or nonverbal rejection from peers or parents, or even physical attack by them. For example, "My friends hit me and call names to me". Rejection may also be latent (e.g., "We play with her because we feel pity for her"). Students also reported that parents may abandon their baby (this was not found by Hymel et al., 1999). Rejection is a unidirectional situation, and the cause of it may be known and explicit (e.g., negative traits of the rejected, such as "mischief", "fat", "wears glasses"; or negative traits of the rejectee, such as "bad character"), or, more frequently, unknown and vague. Children often referred to deficits in companionship, inclusion, material support-security, emotional support, and affection. Slightly more than one-half (52.2%) of the children

reported rejection-abandonment, as indicated in Table 3. There was no significant age or gender difference.

Broken loyalties. The friend distances, ending the relationship, or in a group of three friends, the two of them exclude the third member. For example, "Your best friend leaves you". Sixth graders reported also the termination of a romantic relationship (a finding not identified by Hymel et al., 1999). For example, "You break up with your girlfriend". Perceived deficits are in companionship, emotional support, and reliable alliance. As shown in Table 3, 16.7% of the sample reported broken loyalties. There was no significant age or gender difference.

Exclusion. The child is excluded from a group or an activity in which s/he would like to participate, both in the family and the peer context. For example, "My parents go out and they don't take me with them", "The kids play football and leave me out". It is not always clear if others intended to exclude the child. Perceived deficits are in companionship and inclusion. Table 3 indicates that somewhat less than one-half (42.8%) of the sample reported exclusion. There was no significant age or gender difference.

Being ignored. Others, especially the important others, ignore the child, and do not pay attention to him or her, especially when the child has something important to offer in the relationship. For example, "I feel lonely, when someone ignores me; when I stand beside him and he pretends he doesn't see me", "The kid is neglected by his parents". It is not always clear if the ignoring is intentional, but the child attributes a negative emotional tone to it. Perceived deficits are in companionship, inclusion, and enhancement of worth. As shown in Table 3, nearly one-third (29.4%) of the children reported being ignored. There was a significant increase of this percentage with age, but no significant gender difference.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to examine if Hymel et al.'s (1999) three-dimension model of children's perceptions of loneliness can capture Greek children's perceptions as well and to trace age and gender differences in these perceptions. In addition, a more detailed examination of the emotional dimension in the perceptions of loneliness was attempted, by testing Parkhurst and Hopmeyer's (1999) hypotheses for the emotions contributing to loneliness.

Hypothesis 1, suggesting that the three-dimension model proposed by Hymel et al. (1999) for the perceptions of loneliness will be supported by the Greek data, was confirmed. From early to late childhood, Greek children perceive loneliness as an experience with emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal contexts dimensions.

Hypothesis 3 was also confirmed by the findings of this study showing a trajectory from the perception of loneliness as almost identical to physical aloneness during early childhood (second grade), to the perception of loneliness as synonymous with problematic relationships during middle childhood (fourth grade), and, finally, to the perception of loneliness as a kind of emotional distance arising from problematic relationships during late childhood (sixth grade). This progression is similar to the one found by Bever-Witherby (1986), Demos (1974), and Spores (1991). Supportive evidence of this trajectory is the following: temporary absence as a source of loneliness was found to decrease with age; at the same time, restriction, conflict, and being ignored are increasingly likely sources of loneliness; deficits in companionship, inclusion, emotional support (including self-disclosure and guidance), reliable alliance, and enhancement of worth are given greater importance with increasing age; and preadolescents used emotion terms more frequently than young children in the definition of loneliness.

The emotional component of loneliness, which was not described in detail by Hymel et al. (1999), was indeed very rich in Greek children's reports. A large variety of emotions and related metaphorical expressions emerged: sadness, distress, fear, boredom, anhedonia, helplessness, depression-melancholia, anger, social anxiety, shyness, shame, humiliation, nostalgia, lack of understanding, emptiness, alienation, and madness. These emotional states represent the usual ego-dystonic, depressive nature of this experience throughout childhood. The plethora of metaphorical expressions used by children to describe loneliness implies that some aspects of the emotional dimension of loneliness cannot be articulated except by the use of metaphor.

In agreement with Hypothesis 2, young children (second graders) associated loneliness with fear and distress. Also, as expected, lack of understanding, emptiness, alienation, madness, and nostalgia are present mainly in preadolescents' perceptions of loneliness. However, this hypothesis was only partially confirmed. All the other emotions did not exactly follow the predicted trajectory. More specifically, boredom

increased with age; shame because of being unlikeable and unacceptable, and humiliation because of felt damage to social standing or loss of face were already very frequent during early childhood.

Another unexpected finding was the possibly curvilinear trend for fear, boredom, anhedonia, helplessness, shame over lack of competence, and humiliation because of insults, unfair treatment, ridicule, or abuse. These emotional aspects were less frequent in middle childhood than in early and late childhood. Instead, sadness, shame because of being unlikeable and unacceptable, and humiliation because of felt damage to social standing and loss of face emerged as the characteristics of the emotional tone of loneliness during this age period. Thus, as regards the emotional experience of loneliness, children progress from diffuse negative affectivity (i.e., sadness, distress, fear, anhedonia, helplessness, etc.) during early childhood towards forms of social dissatisfaction (i.e., shame and humiliation), which reflects the children's emphasis on the peer group during middle childhood. It is not until late childhood or preadolescence that the children's contact with inner feelings is restored and that loneliness acquires a deeper, more subjective meaning, and is not as contingent on relationships as it was before.

As expected (Hypothesis 4), girls' greater ability than boys to conceptualize the emotional aspect of the loneliness experience is evident in various facets of loneliness perceptions. Girls used emotion terms (e.g., "I feel", "feeling", "emotion", etc.), and reported depression-melancholia and humiliation because of felt damage to social standing and loss of face more frequently than boys. Girls' stronger emphasis on interpersonal and social relationships with regard to loneliness is also evident in the frequency with which they talk about conflict compared to boys – a finding similar to the one reported by Hymel et al. (1999) and Terrell-Deutsch (1991) – as well as in the emphasis they place on enhancement of worth through relationships.

Weiss (1974) had described six relational provisions for adult relationships – that is, attachment, social integration, opportunity for nurturance, reassurance of worth, reliable alliance, and guidance – which Hymel et al. (1999) extended in their analysis of children's cognitions about loneliness. In the Greek data, similar aspects in the cognitive dimension were identified, but there were some additions. More specifically, material support and security as an interpersonal need was mentioned. This finding supports the ethological interpretation of loneliness (Bowlby, 1973; Weiss,

1973), according to which loneliness has a survival value, as a proximity-promoting mechanism. Self-disclosure and guidance (the latter was described by Weiss, 1974) were added in the emotional support aspect of the cognitive dimension; and social comparison in the enhancement of worth.

Overall, the needs for belonging and intimacy, as well as of validating oneself through relationships, were among the most frequent cognitions related to loneliness in all three age levels studied. This conclusion is based on the high frequency with which children mentioned companionship, inclusion, emotional support, and enhancement of worth.

Another finding worth noting is that certain aspects of the cognitive dimension remain stable from early to late childhood. More specifically, loneliness seems to be a likely outcome throughout childhood when the child perceives deficits in material support-security, affection, enhancement of worth, and opportunities for nurturance. Furthermore, stable sources of loneliness in all three age levels studied are loss, dislocation, rejection-abandonment, broken loyalties, and exclusion. The stability of the aforementioned cognitions and contexts may be thought to explain the observed persistence, or even increase, of socially-oriented self-evaluative emotions, such as shame, and humiliation.

Moreover, the contextual dimension in the perceptions of loneliness is similar to the one described by Hymel et al. (1999), although some necessary additions were made: the fear of darkness and the fear of being lost when others are temporarily absent; restriction was added as a distinct situation denoting physical separation; loneliness may emerge even if the child is a simple spectator of a conflictual situation when the persons involved are significant for the child; and rejection may take the form of the child's abandonment by parents.

In general, Hymel et al.'s (1999) three-dimension model of children's perceptions of loneliness appeared to fit the responses of children living in Greece. However, two divergent findings – namely, restriction as a source of loneliness and boredom as an emotion associated with loneliness even beyond early primary school – may be interpreted as consequences of the highly urbanized environment of Athens which provides children with very few opportunities for outdoor activities. Restriction was more frequently reported by boys than by girls, a finding possibly reflecting the greater emphasis boys place on outdoor activities, in relation to girls. Moreover, nostalgia (i.e., the longing for the past, the happy, first years of childhood) is not interpreted as arising only from the developmental transition from

childhood to adolescence, but also from the fact that in the Greek educational system sixth graders are prepared for the "great transition" from primary to high school, which is a completely different educational environment.

This study did not include cross-cultural comparisons. Such comparisons in the perceptions of loneliness in childhood and adolescence are clearly needed. Some cross-cultural evidence exists on the frequency and intensity of the loneliness experience in childhood and especially adolescence, as well as on reported coping strategies (see Anderson, 1999; Lau, Chan, & Lau, 1999; Rokach, Bacanli, & Ramberan, 2000; Rokach, Bauer, & Orzeck, 2003; Valdivia, Schneider, Chavez, & Chen, 2005), but not on children's and adolescents' perceptions and understanding of loneliness.

Another question not addressed in this study was which specific relational deficits and interpersonal contexts are associated with which specific loneliness-related emotions. The study's evidence points to existing links between emotions, cognitions, and contexts. For example, an increase with age was observed both for the lack of understanding and emptiness (as aspects of the emotional dimension) and for emotional support (as aspect of the cognitive dimension). Also, both fear (in the emotional dimension) and temporary absence (in the interpersonal contexts dimension) were found to decrease from early to middle childhood. Therefore, future research in the field of loneliness perceptions during childhood should focus on the links among the well documented three dimensions of loneliness perceptions, and on how these links vary as a function of age, gender, and culture. Finally, the multidimensional and complex nature of loneliness perceptions necessitates the construction of instruments tapping a much broader range of the loneliness experience in childhood than the existing ones.

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