The Effects of Early Parental Bonding and Age on Loneliness

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Introduction

- High loneliness scores are associated with depression and unsatisfying friendships and romantic relationships (Russell, Cutrona, Rose, & Yurko, 1984).
- Suicide risk in college students increases as loneliness scores increase (Chang, Chang, Lucas, Li, Beavan, Eisner, … & Hirsch, 2019).
- Previous studies found a u-shaped distribution between age and loneliness. Individuals that appear to experience loneliness the most are under the age of 25 and above age of 65 (Victor & Yang, 2011).
- Parental involvement has a significant impact upon the levels of loneliness displayed in young adults such that individuals with high parental attachment have lower levels of loneliness (Robinson, DiTommaso, Barrett, & Hajizadeh, 2013).
- When examining first year college students, parental care was able to predict low levels of loneliness in students (Wiseman, Mayseless, & Sharabany, 2006).
- The goal of the current research was to examine the relationship between mother bonding, father bonding, age, and loneliness. We hypothesized that there would be a relationship between mother bonding and loneliness, a relationship between father bonding and loneliness, and a relationship between age and loneliness. We also hypothesized that there would be differences in loneliness by high and low mother/father bonding and by age groups.

Method

Participants

- Participants ($N = 64$) were students and faculty from Stevenson University.
  - Ages ranged from 18 to 70 years old. 54.7% ($n = 35$) were 18 to 30 years old, 21.9% ($n = 14$) were 31 to 50 years old, 17.2% ($n = 11$) were 51 years old or older, and 6.3% ($n = 4$) did not report their ages
  - 79.9% of participants were female ($n = 51$) and 20.3% of participants were males ($n = 13$).
  - White/Caucasian participants ($n = 44$) made up 68.8% of the sample, Black/African American participants ($n = 18$) made up 28.1% of the sample, and Asian/Pacific Islander participants ($n = 2$) made up the remaining 3.1% of the sample.

Measures

- The 3rd version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996) was used to measure loneliness in this study.
  - Loneliness is defined as how often an individual feels disconnected from others or alone.
  - Loneliness ($M = 41.38$, $SD = 13.62$) was measured using 20 items with a 4-point Likert-type ranging from 1 to 4. The maximum score was 80. A composite score for loneliness was created according to Russell (1996). A higher score indicated higher levels of loneliness. Russell (1996) indicated a loneliness norm ($M = 40.08$, $SD = 9.50$) for college students.
- The Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979) was used to measure mother and father bonding in an individual's first sixteen years of life.
  - Parental bonding is defined by levels of care and overprotection a parent offered to his/her child.
  - There were two identical forms, one regarding the participant's mother ($M = 52.30$, $SD = 14.76$) and the other regarding the participant's father ($M = 47.39$, $SD = 16.87$) .
  - Parental bonding was measured using 25 items with a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 to 3. The maximum score was 75. Composite scores for mother bonding and father bonding were created according to Parker et al. (1979). A higher score indicated higher levels of parental bonding. Parental bonding norms were not indicated in Parker et al.'s (1979) study.
- Participants were also asked to identify their age ($M = 32.68$, $SD = 16.63$), race, and sex.

Procedure

- An online questionnaire was created using Google Forms. The Google Form included an informed consent, the Parental Bonding Instrument, the Loneliness Scale, and a demographics section.
- The link to the questionnaire was distributed via email to professors. The questionnaire was also posted on the Stevenson University Class of 2020 Facebook page and the Psychology Department research page for student access.
- Responses to the questionnaire were collected on a Google Sheets document through the Google Form.
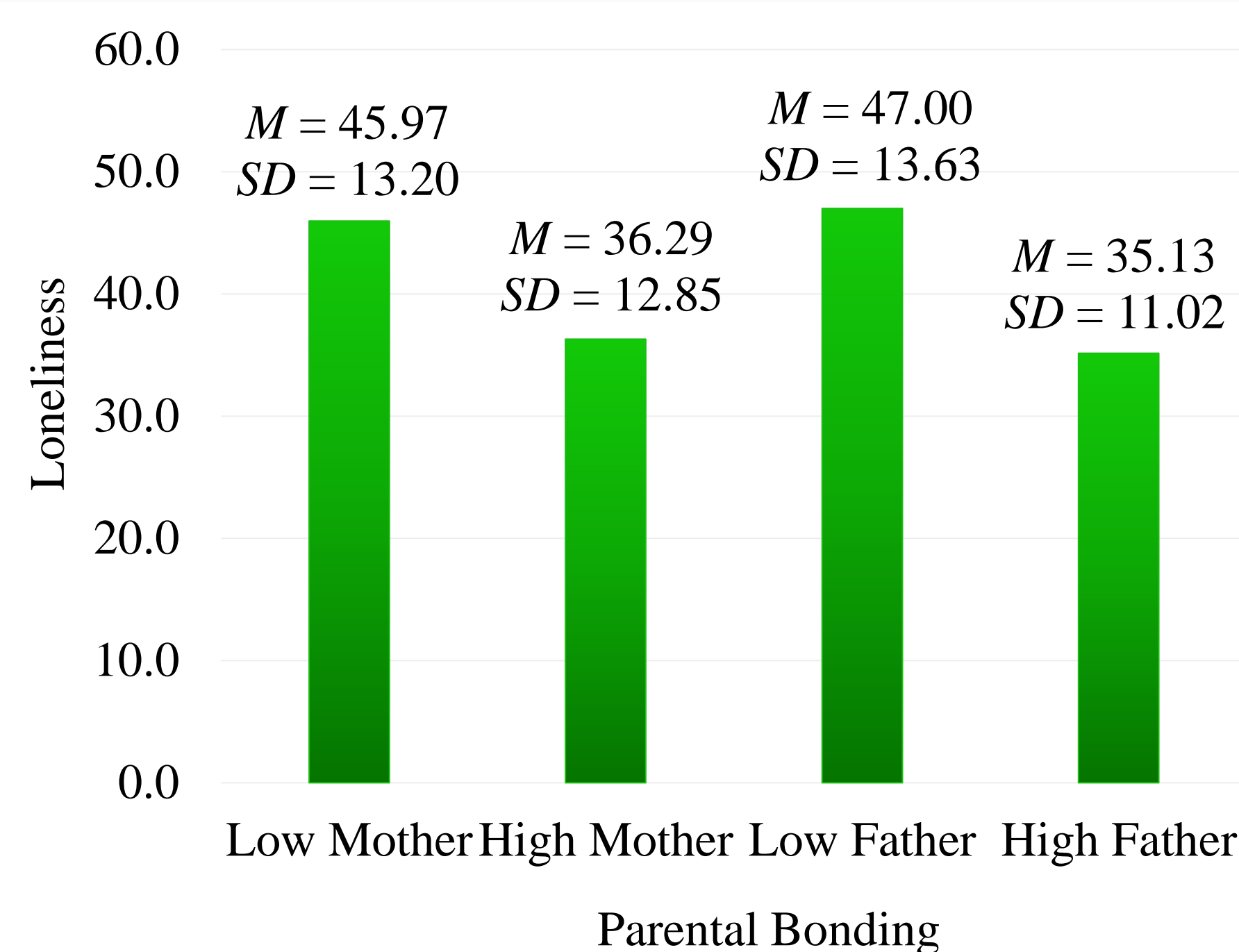
Results

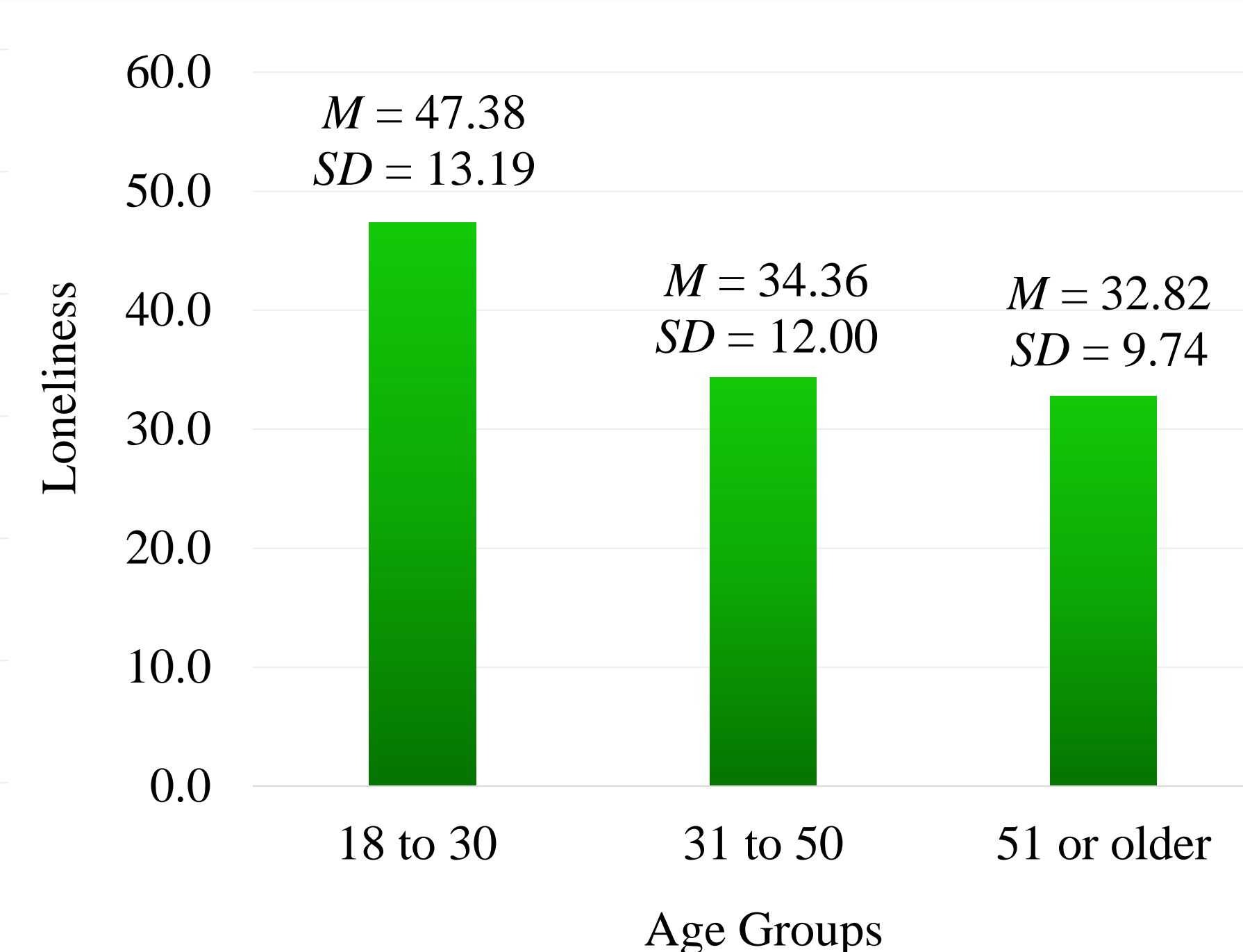Figure 1. Bar graph of loneliness by parental bonding.

Figure 2. Bar graph of loneliness by age group.

Table 1
Correlation Matrix of Loneliness, Mother Bonding, Father Bonding, and Age

	Loneliness	Mother Bonding	Father Bonding
Loneliness	—	—	—
Mother Bonding	-.45**	—	—
Father Bonding	-.47**	.33**	—
Age	-.44**	.20	.12

**. $p < .001$

Table 2
Multiple Regression Predicting Loneliness

Predictors	β	B	SE
Mother Bonding	-.31*	-.29	.11
Father Bonding	-.37**	-.30	.10

Note. $R^2 = .31$. *. $p < .05$. **. $p < .01$

- A paired-samples t test was conducted to compare loneliness in mother bonding and father bonding.
  - Mother bonding ($M = 52.48$, $SD = 14.84$) was significantly higher than father bonding ($M = 47.20$, $SD = 17.04$), $t(59) = 2.12$, $p = .03$.
- Independent-sample t tests were conducted to determine differences in loneliness between high and low mother bonding and between high and low father bonding.
  - Significant results were obtained for mother bonding ($t(59) = 2.89$, $p = .005$) and father bonding ($t(59) = 3.73$, $p < .001$) as can be seen in *Figure 1*.
  - Individuals with low mother bonding scored higher in loneliness than individuals with high mother bonding.
  - Individuals with low father bonding scored higher in loneliness than individuals with high father bonding.
- An ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there were differences between age groups in levels of loneliness.
  - Significant results were obtained ($F(2, 56) = 8.90$, $p < .001$) as can be seen in *Figure 2*.
  - A post hoc test indicated that 18 to 30-year-olds scored significantly higher than both older age groups. There were no significant differences in loneliness between the two older age groups.
- Pearson r correlations were conducted to determine the relationship between loneliness, mother bonding, father bonding, and age.
  - As can be seen in *Table 1, a*s mother bonding increases, loneliness decreased. As father bonding increases, loneliness decreased.
  - As age increases, loneliness decreases.
- A multiple linear regression was calculated to predict loneliness based on mother bonding and father bonding.
  - Significant results were obtained as can be seen in *Table 2*.
  - Both mother and father bonding were significant predictors of loneliness.
  - Findings suggest that 31% of loneliness can be explained by parental bonding implying that more attention to bonding is required in early years of life.

References

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Discussion

Hypothesis

- The results of this study supported the hypothesis that as both mother and father bonding increase, loneliness decreases.
- Differences in loneliness between groups with high mother bonding and low mother bonding, groups with high father bonding and low father bonding, and age groups were found.
  - Therefore, mother bonding, father bonding and age relate to loneliness.
- No interaction effect occurred between variables suggesting that each has an independent relationship with loneliness.

Implications

- The results of this study contribute to the literature because it studied the effects of mother bonding and father bonding on loneliness independently. So long as an individual has a strong bond with either parental figure, they experience less loneliness.
- Both mother and father bonding are important factors in explaining variability in loneliness.
- Age appears to relate to high levels of loneliness in young adults under the ages of 30, suggesting that younger individuals often feel more lonely than older adults.

Limitations

- This study's sample did not have individuals with high loneliness levels.
- This study utilized convenience sampling, which resulted in a restriction of range. There was a low response rate of older adults who participated in the study in comparison to the younger adults. This may have affected the external validity of the study.
- Less than a quarter of participants were male. This makes it difficult to draw any conclusions on loneliness and mother or father bonding based on gender.

Future Research

- More research should be conducted on whether mother bonding or father bonding has a greater influence on loneliness levels.
- More research should focus on how to better bond with children as to decrease their loneliness levels later in life.
- Future studies should include more participants over the age of 50 and preferably over the age of 70 as well.
- Future research on gender effects could be an additional factor in future studies as there may be a difference in the ways males and females understand their personal loneliness levels.
- Loneliness levels could be assessed in 18-year-olds before they begin their freshman year of college and after they have been in college for a few weeks.

Conclusion

- As mother and father bonding increased, loneliness decreased.
- As age increased, loneliness decreased.
- Parental bonding in teenage years should be emphasized to decrease loneliness.
- There should be increased networking/socialization opportunities for 18 to 30-year-olds to increase self-awareness in order to decrease loneliness.