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Does Loneliness Thrive in Relational Freedom or Restriction? The Culture-Loneliness Framework

Luzia Cassis Heu[1], Martijn van Zomeren[1], and Nina Hansen[1]

Abstract

Loneliness is a common experience with major negative consequences for well-being. Although much research has examined protective and risk factors for loneliness, we know little about its *cultural* underpinnings. The few studies that exist seem paradoxical, suggesting that loneliness is higher in cultures where tighter and more demanding (i.e., more *restrictive*) cultural norms about social relationships decrease the risk of social isolation. At the same time, loneliness is lower among *individuals* who hold more restrictive norms or perceive such norms among others around them. We move beyond previous research by generating the *culture-loneliness framework*, suggesting that loneliness occurs across all levels of restrictiveness, but through different predominant types of isolation. More restrictive (i.e., more, tighter, or more demanding) norms about social relationships may better protect from physical isolation (i.e., a lack of social interaction or relationships) but increase the likelihood of emotional and perceived isolation (i.e., a lack of individually satisfying relationships or relationships that do not fulfill cultural ideals). We evaluate this framework by reviewing research at both the individual and the cultural levels, and discuss its theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords

loneliness, culture, culture-loneliness framework, restrictiveness, cultural norms

Human beings all around the world are born into social relationships and live together in networks (e.g., family and friendship circles) and larger collectives (e.g., communities, city, and country). As such, they presumably rely on their social connections to survive and prosper (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; van Zomeren, 2016). The flipside of this universal need to belong is the seemingly universal experience of *loneliness* (e.g., van Staden & Coetzee, 2010), which occurs when individuals lack social connection. Indeed, loneliness has major negative consequences (Cacioppo et al., 2015), including depression, substance abuse, social anxiety, obesity, elevated blood pressure, or diminished immunity. The scientific examination of factors that decrease loneliness is thus key to promoting and maintaining well-being and health.

The common public view is that a lack of social interaction and social relationships cause loneliness (e.g., Hansen, 2018; Leahy, 2017). This implies that the cure for individuals or entire societies would be to get more socially connected (Hendrix, 2018; Whitley, 2017). Research, however, has uncovered a paradox: Individuals in cultures where people are less likely to be alone because of more and stricter social norms regulating social relationships (i.e., more restrictive norms) are often *more* likely to feel lonely than those in cultures where people are more likely to be alone because of less restrictive norms (e.g., Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014). A lack of social connection hence seems insufficient to account for differences in loneliness between societies with different cultures and can hardly explain the loneliness in cultures with more restrictive norms about social relationships.

This article therefore aims to provide a solution to what we refer to as the "cultural paradox of loneliness"—that is, to explain why loneliness tends to be higher in cultures with more restrictive norms about social relationships and where

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individuals are thus less likely to be alone or socially isolated. In the novel *culture-loneliness framework*, we propose that loneliness can thrive whether cultural norms about social relationships are lenient or restrictive, but for different predominant reasons. This framework integrates findings from different levels of analysis (e.g., that collectivistic societies tend to score higher on loneliness than individualistic societies, but individuals who describe themselves or their social environment as more collectivistic sometimes report lower loneliness; Heu, van Zomeren, et al., 2019; Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014). Furthermore, it provides a new theoretical basis for future research by identifying different potential starting points for interventions.

In this article, we, first, define loneliness and describe current theorizing about it. Second, we define key aspects of culture and explain how these should relate to loneliness. Third, we introduce the culture-loneliness framework that outlines how more or less restrictive relationship norms can influence loneliness through different psychological processes. Fourth, we empirically evaluate the framework by reviewing key studies and findings in the literature on culture and loneliness. This also includes an analysis of European Social Survey (ESS) data from 25 countries (Norwegian Centre for Research Data, 2006), which was specifically aimed at testing propositions of the framework (Heu, 2020). Finally, we discuss the culture-loneliness framework's implications for theory and research in a cultural psychology of loneliness, suggesting starting points for culture-sensitive interventions.

Causes and Consequences of Loneliness

Loneliness is an important threat to human health and well-being. In different cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, feeling lonely was related to a higher risk of impaired mental health (including depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, or social anxiety), impaired physical health (including obesity, higher blood pressure, sleeping problems, and weaker immunology; for an overview, see Cacioppo et al., 2015), unhealthier lifestyles (e.g., less physical activity; Hawkley et al., 2009), and even earlier mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). These findings emphasize the importance of preventing chronic loneliness. Yet, escaping loneliness may be hampered by its social consequences: Lonely individuals do not only seem to interpret social situations more negatively (e.g., by paying more attention to negative social cues, or forming more negative memories of social interactions), they are also viewed more negatively by others (who perceive them as less sociable and less attractive; Cacioppo et al., 2014). It is therefore important to identify causes and consequences of loneliness to improve well-being.

Loneliness has been defined as perceived social isolation (Van der Weele et al., 2012) or the feeling of being cut-off or separated from others (Hays & DiMatteo, 1987). Loneliness is thus a subjective experience that may or may not arise from the objective state of being alone (i.e., *solitude*). Indeed, although loneliness should be influenced by how many actual relationships or social interactions an individual has (i.e., more or less *physical* isolation; e.g., De Jong Gierveld, 2009; von Soest et al., 2018), it also results if an individual does not have individually fulfilling, high-quality, or responsive relationships (i.e., *emotional* isolation; Erozkan, 2011; Givertz et al., 2013; Hawkley et al., 2008; Weiss, 1973). Furthermore, it can result if an individual's own or cultural ideals about relationships remain unfulfilled (i.e., *perceived* isolation, resulting from perceived ideal-actual discrepancies regarding social relationships; Heu, van Zomeren, et al., 2019; Johnson & Mullins, 1987; Perlman & Peplau, 1981).

Most work on potential causes of loneliness has focused on individual and relational risk factors. These include, among others, being unmarried (Hansen & Slagsvold, 2015; Hawkley et al., 2008), living alone (Snell, 2017; Swader, 2019), genetic disposition (Matthews et al., 2016), introversion or neuroticism (Buecker et al., 2020), an insecure attachment style (Erozkan, 2011; Givertz et al., 2013), a small number or low quality of relationships (Hawkley et al., 2008; Shiovitz-Ezra & Leitsch, 2010), or few social interactions (e.g., De Jong Gierveld, 2009; von Soest et al., 2018). Although there is consensus that one can feel lonely whether one is alone or surrounded by others, most of these characteristics revolve around the extent to which individuals are or may become socially isolated. This is also reflected in models that propose that a key function of loneliness is to motivate socially isolated individuals to reconnect with others (Cacioppo et al., 2014).

This reasoning, however, does not consider that many people, for instance in collectivistic cultures, are hardly ever alone, yet also report to feel lonely: Despite large differences in how individuals relate to each other (e.g., Adams et al., 2012), loneliness seems to be a rather universal (van Staden & Coetzee, 2010) and qualitatively similar experience across different cultures (Heu et al., 2020). Indeed, loneliness in collectivistic cultures or cultures where individuals are more socially connected tends to be even *higher* than in individualistic cultures or, more generally, in cultures where individuals are less socially connected (e.g., Jylhä & Jokela, 1990; Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014; cf. Barreto et al., 2020). This highlights how little we know about loneliness in cultures with more restrictive norms about social relationships, and hence also about how to counteract it in culturally sensitive ways. Indeed, given that risk factors seem to differ, loneliness interventions from a culture with less restrictive norms about social relationships are likely to be ineffective in a culture with more restrictive norms. A better cross-cultural understanding of loneliness is therefore highly

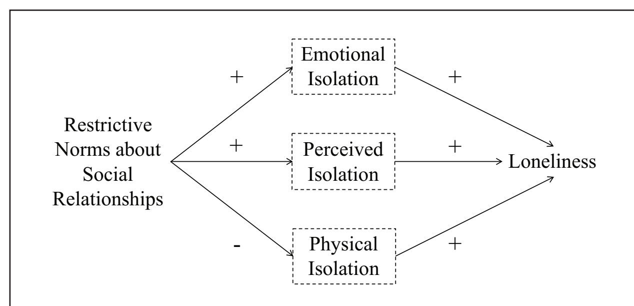

Figure 1. The culture-loneliness framework.

relevant to prevent and counteract the public health risk of loneliness in different cultures.

Toward a Cultural Psychology of Loneliness

We offer a psychological analysis of culture and loneliness, in which culture reflects shared ideas (i.e., norms, beliefs, or values) about what is valuable and valid or important and true (i.e., an *intersubjective* approach to culture; Chiu et al., 2010). These should be strongly intertwined with other aspects of culture such as shared ways of acting (e.g., Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952), internalized characteristics (e.g., Triandis, 1995), or cultural products (e.g., language, art, or advertising, Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952; Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008). Also, they can, by themselves, be powerful drivers of human cognition or behavior (e.g., Chiu et al., 2010).

Against this backdrop, cultural norms *about social relationships* (e.g., how often one should visit one's parents), are particularly important for understanding loneliness. Indeed, there is quite some variation in norms about social relationships between different groups (e.g., Adams et al., 2004, 2012; Argyle et al., 1986; Imamoğlu & Karakitapoğlu-Aygün, 2006; Li et al., 2006). For instance, North Americans appear to expect emotional intimacy and open disclosure in their romantic relationships, whereas West Africans rather expect mutual obligations and caution regarding revelations to each other (Adams et al., 2004).

Such differences in cultural norms are relevant for loneliness because they steer how individuals go about and evaluate their social relationships (Argyle et al., 1986; Perlman & Peplau, 1981; van Zomeren, 2016). For instance, the more demanding cultural norms about visiting one's family are, the more often individuals will, on average, visit their parents. Accordingly, visiting one's parents once a week may be evaluated as little or as much. This is important because both characteristics of actual social relationships and their comparison to norms or ideals about social relationships are determinants of loneliness (Heu, van Zomeren, et al., 2019; Johnson & Mullins, 1987; Perlman & Peplau, 1981).

However, despite the theoretical relations between cultural norms and loneliness, only few studies have empirically examined their relation so far—and their findings seem inconclusive. Counter to the idea that tighter and more demanding cultural norms about social relationships (i.e., more *restrictive* norms) should increase social connection and hence decrease loneliness (e.g., Hendrix, 2018; Whitley, 2017), most research supports the notion that more restrictive norms increase the risk for loneliness. For instance, average levels of loneliness tend to be *higher* in more collectivistic countries[1] or regions (Anderson, 1999; Fokkema et al., 2012; Imamoğlu et al., 1993; Jones et al., 1985; Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014; Sundström et al., 2009; Swader, 2019; Walker, 1993; Yang & Victor, 2011; cf. Barreto et al., 2020[2]). This suggests that, at the cultural level, more restrictive norms have the potential to create higher risk for loneliness.

However, findings at the individual level partly deviate from culture-level findings—and even when individual and cultural levels are examined jointly (Jylhä & Jokela, 1990; Swader, 2019). Indeed, multiple studies suggest that more restrictive internalized or individually perceived norms may have the potential to *protect* from loneliness: Indicators of higher collectivism and higher relational stability (i.e., stronger cultural norms to hold on to established social relationships; Heu, Hansen, et al., 2019) were found to be related to *lower* loneliness at the individual level (Heu, Hansen, et al., 2019; Heu, van Zomeren, et al., 2019; Jylhä & Jokela, 1990; Triandis et al., 1988).[3] Nevertheless, findings at the individual level are also more mixed than at the cultural level: Unlike most indicators of higher collectivism, perceived norms about how one *should* relate to others were not significantly related to, or related to higher loneliness at the individual level (Heu, van Zomeren, et al., 2019). Furthermore, more restrictive norms implied by lower relational mobility (i.e., norms that provide individuals with less opportunities to form new, and choose their relationships; based on Yuki & Schug, 2012) were related to *higher* loneliness (Heu, Hansen, et al., 2019). In sum, although it seems that more restrictive norms usually imply a higher risk for loneliness at the cultural level, more restrictive norms may also sometimes have the potential to protect from loneliness at the individual level. To account for these mixed findings and the cultural paradox of loneliness, we introduce the culture-loneliness framework.

The Culture-Loneliness Framework

The core argument of the culture-loneliness framework is that loneliness occurs and can be caused by similar risks across all levels of restrictiveness, but that *predominant* reasons for loneliness differ. As illustrated in Figure 1, less restrictive norms should increase the risk for *physical* isolation, whereas more restrictive norms should increase the risk for *emotional* and *perceived* isolation. This is important in practice because it implies different starting points for

interventions in cultures that differ in the restrictiveness of cultural norms about social relationships.

The culture-loneliness framework integrates existing, and mostly *cross*-cultural, literature in novel theorizing that moves beyond a dichotomous, difference-focused (e.g., individualism versus collectivism; East versus West) cultural psychology of loneliness that equates cultures with countries. It places previous studies, which mostly compared countries, on a continuum of less to more restrictive norms, and can be applied to countries as much as to any other cultural unit (i.e., any group with shared beliefs, norms, or values; Chiu et al., 2010).

Specifically, the *restrictiveness* of norms about social relationships describes the extent to which social norms prescribe how people should relate to each other. Higher restrictiveness results if there are more social norms about social relationships, if it is more important that these norms are adhered to, implying higher sanctions for deviation (i.e., higher tightness; Gelfand et al., 2006), or if these norms are more demanding (which restricts the range of acceptable behaviors due to ceiling effects). That is, the more restrictive norms about social relationships are, the more they restrict the range of acceptable or possible relational behaviors. As such, higher restrictiveness reduces the individual freedom to choose how to relate to others. Note that restrictiveness can refer to single cultural norms (i.e., single norms about social relationships that are more demanding or important to adhere to) or to systems of cultural norms (i.e., to entire cultures; in line with Chiu et al., 2010). Indeed, single cultural norms within an overall more or less restrictive culture may not have the same or not even similar levels of restrictiveness. Still, a culture can, *on average*, be described as more or less restrictive.

Importantly, restrictiveness is related to, but also different from, more general cultural variables. For instance, higher restrictiveness should relate to lower *relational mobility* (Yuki & Schug, 2012) because norms implied by lower relational mobility restrict opportunities to meet new others and hence to individually choose one's relationship partners (Heu, Hansen, & van Zomeren, 2019). Higher restrictiveness should also relate to higher *collectivism* because higher collectivism implies more demanding and tighter norms about social relationships (Gelfand et al., 2006; Oyserman et al., 2002). By definition, higher restrictiveness is also closely related to higher *tightness* (Gelfand et al., 2006), but it is a more specific predictor of loneliness because it revolves only around social relationships. As such, higher restrictiveness *includes* higher tightness regarding social relationships, while also including the number or demandingness of cultural norms about relationships.[4] Due to its close link with different cultural variables and its focus on social relationships, restrictiveness therefore plays a major role in a cultural psychology of loneliness. We next explain how it can be connected to loneliness through emotional, perceived, and physical isolation.

Restrictiveness and Emotional, Perceived, and Physical Isolation

Our framework distinguishes three types of isolation as distinct risk factors for loneliness.[5] Although present in all cultures, they should be more or less likely depending on the level of restrictiveness. First, more restrictive norms about social relationships should reduce the likelihood that individuals become *physically* isolated; that they lack social interaction and social relationships in general (De Jong Gierveld & Tesch-Römer, 2012; Georgas et al., 1997; Höllinger & Haller, 1990). Indeed, if cultural norms about social relationships become very lenient, individuals may choose convenience at the expense of their social relationships. For instance, those who can choose to do so may leave effortful or conflictual family relationships, live alone rather than deal with the habits of housemates, work from home rather than commute to a shared office, or use the faster self-checkout rather than the human cashier at the supermarket. In a study examining housing preferences in Japan, individuals, for example, indicated to prefer residential complexes exactly because they allowed for anonymity and the option to avoid neighbors (Kiefer, 1980). In sum, individuals may in such cases end up with fewer social relationships and interactions than is beneficial for them, making them feel lonely due to more physical isolation.

Second, more restrictive norms may increase the likelihood of *emotional* isolation. If individuals get restricted in their freedom to choose whom they relate to or how they relate to others, this should undermine that they can leave low-quality or harmful social relationships (e.g., conflictual family relationships; Heu, Hansen, et al., 2019) and that they can establish responsive relationships (i.e., emotionally rewarding relationships of mutual understanding; Reis & Gable, 2015). Despite a lower risk of too few social contacts, individuals in more (versus less) restrictive cultures may hence be at a higher risk for loneliness because of less opportunities to establish a network of *individually satisfying* relationships (e.g., Erozkan, 2011; Givertz et al., 2013; Hawkley et al., 2008; Weiss, 1973).

Third, more restrictive norms also imply a higher likelihood of *perceived isolation*—that is, of higher discrepancies between ideal and actual social relationships,[6] which are important antecedents of loneliness (Johnson & Mullins, 1987; Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Indeed, more restrictive norms can reduce the number of culturally acceptable ways of relating to others (through more social norms about relationships), make ideals less attainable (through more demanding social norms), and increase the severity of deviation (through tighter norms). This, for one, increases the risk for loneliness through a higher likelihood of social sanctions for norm deviations (Cacioppo et al., 2014). Furthermore, individuals themselves may more often perceive their social relationships

as insufficient or unsatisfactory due to internalized cultural norms. For instance, a strong cultural norm to have children implies that those who are childless will be more likely to perceive their relationships as deficient. They may hence feel lonelier than if they were living in a culture where many choose not to have children (Zoutewelle-Terovan & Liefbroer, 2017). Similarly, in cultures where the norm is that friends should provide emotional support whenever needed, more individuals may experience their friendships as unsatisfying than in cultures where friends should predominantly provide instrumental support (for cultural differences in friendship, see Adams et al., 2012). Again, this should increase the risk for loneliness through more perceived isolation.

To illustrate the reasoning of the culture-loneliness framework, consider two concrete examples (Heu et al., 2020): In an Austrian city (a less restrictive culture), a 40-year-old man lives entirely alone. He does not have a partner, has broken off contact with both family and peers, by whom he never felt accepted. In an Indian village (a more restrictive culture), a 30-year-old woman lives with her husband, children, and in-laws, but her unemployed husband does not support her. She would like to leave him, but a divorce may entail stigmatization and financial difficulties. Both feel lonely, but only for the Austrian man, this is connected to physical isolation (although he may also experience emotional isolation). The Indian woman rather experiences emotional isolation, while risking perceived isolation if she decides to leave her husband.

Overlap and distinctiveness of isolation types. Importantly, the different types of isolation are not mutually exclusive. For one, different types of isolation can simply co-occur: Singles in one-person households without close friends or family relationships are both physically and emotionally isolated. Furthermore, particularly perceived isolation can also *be intertwined with* emotional and/or physical isolation. For instance, in environments where the cultural norm is that the (romantic) partner is the main source of emotional closeness for adults (rather than that emotional closeness can be derived from friendships, family relationships, and/or partnerships), not having a partner increases the risk for perceived isolation (e.g., singles deviate from a cultural relationship norm; they or others around them may perceive their relationships as insufficient). Exactly through their deviation from a relationship norm, singles may, however, also be cut off from the main source of emotional closeness in this culture (i.e., they will be more emotionally isolated). Moreover, if the social sanctions that are often implied by perceived isolation take the form of interpersonal rejection or social exclusion, more perceived isolation also entails more physical isolation.

Indeed, although different types of isolation can hence overlap, we distinguish them in the culture-loneliness framework because neither type *necessarily* entails another: Despite close relationships and an extensive network (i.e., no emotional or physical isolation), individuals can experience perceived isolation because of not having children or because of happening to be alone on a Friday evening (i.e., deviating from a cultural norm). Similarly, individuals can be physically isolated without being emotionally isolated: Homemakers, unemployed individuals, immobile elderly people, or those working from home are likely to spend most of their time alone or might miss a community (e.g., a close neighborhood or a working group). Nevertheless, they may be in fulfilling partnerships, or have close friends or family members. Different types of isolation can thus be related, but are still distinct. Accordingly, the culture-loneliness framework suggests that all types of isolation should exist in both more and less restrictive cultures, but different isolation types should, *on average*, be more or less likely.

Types of isolation as result of systems of norms. Indeed, the culture-loneliness framework can be used to analyze the influence of single cultural norms but should much better predict the implications of *systems* of cultural norms. This is because, the influence of any norm can be amplified or reduced by other cultural norms within the same norms system. Specifically, cultures summarize different—and sometimes contradictory—cultural norms, with different implications for the three isolation types: For instance, norms about romantic relationships (e.g., Dion & Dion, 2005; Garlen & Sandlin, 2017) or about emotional support in friendships (Adams et al., 2012) seem to, paradoxically, be particularly prevalent in less restrictive cultures. Single norms in less restrictive cultures can hence increase the likelihood of perceived isolation, but the overall likelihood of perceived isolation in less restrictive cultures will still remain relatively low. Indeed, a single cultural norm alone will only relate to actual increase or decreases in isolation if combined with other cultural norms with similar effects: One less restrictive norm (e.g., about how often to see one's mother) should, for example, only increase physical isolation if combined with other lenient cultural norms about social relationships (e.g., about how often to see one's friends, whether to personally know one's neighbors, whether it is acceptable to live alone) or even with nonrelational cultural norms that promote less restrictive norms (e.g., higher importance of individual success and professional careers). Single cultural norms will therefore increase or decrease *risks* for certain types of isolation, but this will often not be reflected in overall higher or lower levels of isolation because of interactions with other norms in the same culture.

The culture-loneliness framework at different levels of analysis. The culture-loneliness framework and its components have somewhat different meanings at the *individual* and at the *cultural level*. This may be key to explaining why

culture-level associations between restrictive norms and social relationships often do not replicate at the individual level. Indeed, culture-level norms usually describe more objective social realities than individual-level norms: Culture-level norms are what is done by, or should be done according to, most cultural members. By contrast, individual-level norms are usually internalized norms or individual perceptions of shared norms, which may or may not reflect social realities (e.g., an individual may perceive others in their community to have at least five close friends, while this may be more or less correct). As such, culture-level norms should often have different implications for isolation and loneliness than individual-level norms. For instance, both more restrictive individual- and culture-level norms should predict more perceived isolation, but whereas individual-level norms may only entail that individuals perceive their relationships as unfulfilling because they do not adhere to the norm (i.e., one manifestation of perceived isolation), culture-level norms will, in addition, more often entail actual social sanctions for deviation (e.g., stigma, social exclusion; that is, a different manifestation of perceived isolation). Owing to these different meanings of relationship norms and perceived isolation at different levels of analysis, more restrictive norms may then, for example, more strongly predict the loneliness that results from perceived isolation at the cultural than at the individual level.

Furthermore, the restrictiveness of norms *at the individual level* may have different associations with loneliness *depending on* the restrictiveness of norms at the cultural level. Specifically, more restrictive norms at the cultural level may imply that even those who individually indicate to be less connected than others may not experience harmful levels of physical isolation. At the same time, those who endorse restrictive norms even more than average might be more likely to hold unreachable ideals (i.e., to experience perceived isolation). By contrast, one could also speculate that internalized (i.e., individual-level) norms and characteristics need to be aligned with culture-level norms to (better) protect from loneliness (in line with findings by Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014; Seepersad et al., 2008). Although no evidence is available yet for such cross-level interactions, multiple studies already provide support for the general idea of the cultural-loneliness framework (Figure 1). We turn to this empirical evidence in the next section.

Empirical Evidence

Below, we outline how the culture-loneliness framework is supported by culture-level and individual-level findings from (a) the literature on loneliness and culture (e.g., individualism-collectivism, norms implied by relational mobility or relational stability) and (b) an analysis of ESS data with the explicit aim of evaluating the framework.

Physical Isolation

A first key proposition of the culture-loneliness framework is that less restrictive norms imply a higher likelihood of physical isolation (see the upper pathway in Figure 1). This proposition has hardly been examined at the cultural level because lower restrictiveness was usually related to lower average loneliness in countries or regions (e.g., Jylhä & Jokela, 1990; Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014; cf. Barreto et al., 2020). Indicators of physical isolation were hence hardly used to explain culture-level variation in loneliness (with the exception of Fokkema et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, *at the individual level*, there is abundant evidence that physical isolation can increase loneliness, and even some direct support for the notion that higher restrictiveness relates to loneliness through higher physical isolation. For one, living alone, having less interactions with family or friends, being unmarried, and having weaker community bonds were all related to higher loneliness at the individual level (e.g., Jylhä & Jokela, 1990; Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014; Sundström et al., 2009; Swader, 2019), despite partly being associated with *lower* loneliness at the cultural level (e.g., in different European regions; Jylhä & Jokela, 1990). Furthermore, in different European countries, individual-level individualism (i.e., an indicator of lower restrictiveness) was related to a lower frequency of contact with close others (i.e., higher physical isolation), and this was, in turn, associated with higher loneliness (Heu, van Zomeren, et al., 2019). Also, in samples from Puerto Rico and Illinois, idiocentrism (i.e., higher individual-level individualism) was found to be related to less and less good social support than allocentrism (i.e., higher individual-level collectivism; Triandis et al., 1988). Finally, norms of lower relational stability (i.e., an indicator of lower restrictiveness) were associated with more physical isolation in Finnish, Portuguese, Austrian, and Polish samples (e.g., lower social network closure, more evenings spent alone, and less contact with close others; Heu, Hansen, et al., 2019). Together, this suggests that less restrictive norms can indeed imply a higher risk of physical isolation and the thus resulting loneliness.

Some conflicting evidence, however, exists regarding norms implied by higher relational mobility (indicating less restrictiveness) because these were related to *less* physical isolation (with the same indicators and samples as for relational stability; Heu, Hansen, et al., 2019). This may be because, unlike other indicators of higher restrictiveness (collectivism or norms of higher relational stability), norms implied by lower relational mobility do not reduce individual freedom *to ensure* less physical isolation. Instead, they merely describe fewer opportunities for new relationships. Taken together, it hence seems that most—yet not all—more restrictive norms manifest themselves in relationship characteristics that may protect individuals from the loneliness of physical isolation.

Perceived and Emotional Isolation

A second key proposition of the culture-loneliness framework is that more restrictive norms should imply higher risks of perceived and emotional isolation than less restrictive norms (see lower part of Figure 1). Indeed, many researchers have theoretically explained higher loneliness in more socially connected or collectivistic cultures by higher expectations from social relationships or a higher sensitivity to deviations from such expectations (i.e., a higher likelihood of perceived isolation; De Jong Gierveld & Tesch-Römer, 2012; Johnson & Mullins, 1987; Jylhä & Jokela, 1990; Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014; Sundström et al., 2009; van Tilburg et al., 2004). However, direct empirical evidence is sparse.

One exception suggests that collectivists (i.e., individuals who hold more restrictive norms) may need more social connection than individualists to avoid feeling lonely: Across different European countries, individual-level collectivism increased the positive association between social isolation and loneliness (Swader, 2019). This indicates that collectivists may be more sensitive to social isolation, and hence at a higher risk of perceived isolation and loneliness.[7] Similarly, in samples from the Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, and Portugal (Heu, van Zomeren, et al., 2019), holding more demanding norms about how one should act in social relationships (i.e., an indicator of more restrictive norms) was related to some less favorable self-reported discrepancies between ideal and actual relationship characteristics (i.e., more perceived isolation). By contrast, and counter to predictions of the culture-loneliness framework, other individual-level indices of higher restrictiveness (i.e., being or perceiving others around oneself as more collectivistic) in this study seemed quite unrelated to, or even related to *more favorable* ideal-actual discrepancies. However, the culture-loneliness framework suggests that perceived isolation should be particularly increased by higher restrictiveness *at the cultural* rather than at the individual level (and more so for systems of more restrictive norms than for single cultural norms). As such, these individual-level findings may not be overly surprising.

Indeed, *at the cultural level*, there is indirect evidence that more restrictive cultural norms can increase loneliness through higher perceived isolation. For instance, in the second half of the 20th century, living alone became more common among elderly people. At the same time, living alone became less related to higher loneliness in this age group (Victor et al., 2002). Living alone should thus at least partly increase the risk for loneliness through some comparison with a more or less restrictive cultural norm about living alone (rather than through physical or emotional isolation only). Similarly, in countries where expectations regarding familial care for elderly people were higher (i.e., more restrictive norms), old-age loneliness was found to also be relatively higher (De Jong Gierveld, 2009; "Special Eurobarometer 283," 2007). This is in line with the culture-loneliness framework because, in these countries, elderly people who are not cared for by their families should experience more perceived isolation, leading to higher average loneliness.

These findings are also backed up by studies in younger age groups. For instance, in the United States, adolescents without a romantic partner felt lonelier than in South Korea (Seepersad et al., 2008). Indeed, the culture-loneliness framework predicts that singles experience more perceived isolation in cultures with more versus less demanding norms about romantic relationships. Since romantic relationships are more important in the United States than in South Korea, singles in the United States should hence feel lonelier due to more perceived isolation. Similar results were found regarding family relationships and the availability of a confidant. These were related to loneliness across different European countries, yet not to the same extent: Among adolescents and adults in more *collectivistic* countries, interaction with *family* was more closely associated with loneliness, whereas in more *individualistic* countries, having a *confidant* was more closely associated with loneliness (Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014). This is in line with findings by Seepersad et al. (2008) and the culture-loneliness framework because family tends to be more important in collectivistic cultures, and individually selected relationships tend to be more important in individualistic cultures. As norms in important relationship domains are usually more restrictive (with more, or more demanding norms), they should carry a higher risk for perceived isolation and the resulting loneliness—which is exactly what these studies suggest.

Some of the evidence for perceived isolation can also be interpreted as potential evidence that more restrictive cultural norms imply more emotional isolation. After all, more restrictive cultures (e.g., in which one type of relationship such as family relationships or romantic relationships are main sources of relational provisions) may prevent that those who lack the relationships that are key in this culture (e.g., adolescents without a romantic relationship in United States American culture; Seepersad et al., 2008; individuals with poor family relationships in collectivistic cultures; Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014) can seek emotional closeness in different relationships (e.g., friendships). They might therefore not only feel lonely because of perceived isolation but also because of emotional isolation.

Direct evidence for emotional isolation as explanation for how more restrictive norms relate to loneliness is, however, sparse. In recent work, we reasoned that norms implied by higher relational mobility increase the likelihood that individuals can create individually satisfying relationships (lower emotional isolation; Heu, Hansen, et al., 2019). This is because these individuals should have more opportunities to establish social relationships according to their own preferences. Indeed, perceived relationship quality seemed to have the potential to explain associations between norms

implied by relational mobility and loneliness.[8] Unexpectedly, however, the same held for the association between norms of relational stability (i.e., *more* restrictive cultural norms) and loneliness. Although not in line with the culture-loneliness framework, this does not entirely contradict our reasoning: Again, this study was conducted at the individual level, whereas the likelihood of emotional isolation should be higher at the cultural level.

An Analysis of ESS Data

To add to the evidence provided by previous research for the culture-loneliness framework, we analyzed Round 3 of the ESS (Heu, 2020). Indeed, most past studies have been conducted either only at the cultural or only at the individual level, implying that results for different levels may differ because of distinct indicators. Studies that have examined both levels simultaneously used a single proxy of individualism-collectivism (Swader, 2019), or were conducted with samples of elderly people in few European regions only (Jylhä & Jokela, 1990). ESS data allowed for a joint analysis of multiple indicators of restrictiveness at both individual and cultural levels in a broad age range. Specifically, we hence examined whether (a) in line with the culture-loneliness framework and past literature, more restrictive norms relate to higher loneliness at the cultural level, but less so at the individual level. Furthermore, we examined whether (b) more restrictive norms may increase emotional isolation (at least at the cultural level) and less restrictive norms may increase physical isolation (ESS data do not contain information about perceived isolation).

We found that at the cultural level (i.e., in different European countries), more restrictive norms about social relationships (e.g., assessed with indices of own and of perceived others' traditional ideas about family relationships, and an index of family relations) were related to higher loneliness, while at the individual level, findings for different more restrictive norms were mixed (in line with Jylhä & Jokela, 1990; Swader, 2019). For instance, both indices of more traditional ideas about family relationships were related to higher loneliness (although much less strongly than at the cultural level), whereas more family relations were related to lower loneliness at the individual level. That is, the risk potential implied by more restrictive norms may indeed be higher at the cultural than at the individual level. According to the culture-loneliness framework, this is because individual-level norms entail lower risks for emotional and perceived isolation: More restrictive individual-level norms may or may not describe actual social realities and should hence restrict the individual freedom to choose fulfilling relationships and entail actual social sanctions less than culture-level norms.

Furthermore, we found support for the notion that less restrictive norms about relationships may imply a higher likelihood of physical isolation, and more restrictive norms a higher likelihood of emotional isolation. In countries with less restrictive norms, living alone and having less family relations (i.e., more physical isolation) were more common, and both were clearly related to higher loneliness at the individual level. Moreover, in countries with more restrictive norms, higher shares of individuals indicated not to have a confidant (i.e., more emotional isolation), which was also related to higher loneliness at the individual level. Similar to past studies, more or less restrictive norms were again not significantly related to indicators of different types of isolation at the individual level.

Taken together, both findings from the loneliness literature and an analysis of ESS data thus provide some first evidence that more restrictive cultural norms imply lower physical isolation, yet higher perceived and emotional isolation (at least at the cultural level).

General Discussion

We have presented the culture-loneliness framework, which suggests that more and less restrictive cultural norms about social relationships imply different risk factors for loneliness: More restrictive norms can increase the risk for loneliness through a higher likelihood of emotional and perceived isolation, whereas more lenient cultural norms can increase the risk for loneliness through a higher likelihood of physical isolation. As such, the culture-loneliness framework integrates past findings that more restrictive norms usually relate to higher loneliness at the cultural level, but that they can relate to higher or lower loneliness, or not significantly relate to it at the individual level (e.g., Heu, van Zomeren, et al., 2019; Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014; Swader, 2019). Empirical findings provide first indirect and direct evidence for the mechanisms through which more or less restrictive norms are suggested to relate to loneliness (e.g., Heu, Hansen, et al., 2019; Heu, van Zomeren, et al., 2019; Seepersad et al., 2008; Swader, 2019). The culture-loneliness framework can hence provide different starting points for culture-specific interventions, and for future research to further develop a cultural psychology of loneliness.

Theoretical Implications

The culture-loneliness framework contributes to the literature on cultural norms and loneliness by integrating disparate findings from previous research, and by thereby offering an explanation for the cultural paradox of loneliness (i.e., that individuals report less loneliness in cultures where people are more likely to be alone because of less restrictive norms): Although *some* individuals in societies with less restrictive cultures may be at a higher risk for feeling lonely due to being more alone or having too few relationships (i.e., more physical isolation), less restrictive norms seem to,

overall, protect larger parts of these societies from loneliness through decreasing emotional and perceived isolation. This also nuances the common public opinion that more individualistic cultures (i.e., cultures with less restrictive norms) imply a particularly high risk for loneliness (e.g., Hendrix, 2018; Whitley, 2017). Indeed, it seems that most human beings, as "social animals," intrinsically seek enough social connection to avoid chronic loneliness, even if not required by cultural norms.

Different from previous work, the culture-loneliness framework does not only explain higher loneliness in cultures with more restrictive norms by higher expectations from relationships or a higher sensitivity to deviations from relationship norms (i.e., perceived isolation; De Jong Gierveld & Tesch-Römer, 2012; Jylhä & Jokela, 1990; Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014; van Tilburg et al., 2004), but also by a higher likelihood of actually lacking individually fulfilling social relationships (i.e., emotional isolation). That is, individuals in more restrictive cultures may feel lonely because they cannot seek out others who share or validate their attitudes, emotions, or behavior as much as those in less restrictive cultures. In practice, this implies that loneliness in more restrictive cultures may not only be counteracted by addressing sensitivity to social isolation (Jylhä & Jokela, 1990; Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014), but also by addressing social norms that relate to individual freedom to choose relationships (Heu, Hansen, et al., 2019).

Furthermore, our framework provides a possible explanation for the finding that the same more restrictive norms can relate to higher loneliness at the cultural level, but not be significantly related to, or even relate to lower loneliness at the individual level (Heu, van Zomeren, et al., 2019; Jylhä & Jokela, 1990; Swader, 2019). The risk implied by more restrictive norms should indeed be higher at the cultural level because culture-level norms usually describe social realities, whereas individual-level norms may describe outside realities *and/or* individual perceptions. As such, culture-level norms can more rigidly restrict individuals' freedom to establish fulfilling relationships, imply more social sanctions for deviation, and are more difficult to change by the individual. Culture-level norms should thus increase the risk for loneliness more than individual-level norms.

Relatedly, culture-level restrictiveness should provide fewer opportunities *to escape* loneliness than less restrictive culture-level norms or than more restrictive norms at the individual level. Individuals in cultures with less restrictive norms can, for example, counteract their physical isolation in co-housing projects, or by engaging in voluntary work. Those who feel lonely because of *perceiving* or *having internalized* more restrictive norms can aim to change their expectations (e.g., through psychotherapy). However, individuals in more restrictive cultures can hardly reduce social sanctions for their norm deviations themselves, and can often not even alleviate emotional isolation: They may, for instance, lack the freedom to terminate unfulfilling partnerships or lack opportunities to compensate for low partnership quality with other relationships (e.g., intimate friendships or even work relationships). Indeed, such compensation may be hampered by more rules about what can be told to whom, or by fewer opportunities to meet others outside the family (especially for women) in more restrictive cultures. The highest risk for *chronic* loneliness may hence be implied by more restrictive culture-level norms. This also emphasizes the need to examine cultural risk factors for loneliness at *different* levels of analysis.

Practical Implications

In line with Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, the culture-loneliness framework suggests that individuals need both agency (to seek relationships that are individually satisfying) and relatedness. A moderate amount of restrictiveness (i.e., a mix of some more restrictive and some less restrictive norms) may therefore be best to avoid loneliness. Indeed, moderate restrictiveness can foster both agency and relatedness by preventing that any type of isolation becomes excessive. This is in line with previous findings that both the more restrictive norms that encourage individuals to hold on to their existing social relationships (higher relational stability) and the less restrictive norms that provide opportunities to establish new social relationships (norms implied by higher relational mobility) relate to lower loneliness (Heu, Hansen, et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the finding that, at the cultural level, more lenient norms about social relationships were quite consistently related to *lower* loneliness (cf. Barreto et al., 2020) argues for fostering more lenient norms about social relationships in larger-scale policies.

The culture-loneliness framework can, additionally, provide the basis for culture-sensitive interventions against loneliness because it pinpoints which cultures should increase the likelihood of which risk factor. It suggests that interventions in *less restrictive* cultures should focus on preventing *physical* isolation—for instance, by fostering community structures, or by encouraging individuals to establish at least a minimal number of supportive relationships. By contrast, in *more restrictive* cultures, interventions should focus on reducing *physical* and *emotional* isolation—for instance, by creating safe spaces and establishing communities for those who deviate from relationship norms, by changing cultural norms to allow individuals to form individually rewarding relationships or by reducing social stigma for norm deviations. Which exact intervention is appropriate and effective may, however, depend on the characteristics and cultural norms of its target group. As such, any intervention needs to be preceded by careful research in the setting where it should eventually be applied.

Limitations and Future Directions

By suggesting which risks for loneliness should be particularly likely in which cultures, the culture-loneliness framework offers a potential roadmap for culture-sensitive loneliness research and interventions. Of course, the current empirical evidence only allows for a first evaluation of the validity and usefulness of this framework, and will therefore benefit from additional, more targeted, empirical tests.

For one, past studies have exclusively been correlational and limited to a few indicators of restrictive cultural norms and isolation. Although many correlations seem to point into predicted directions, other aspects of isolation may be equally or even more relevant for loneliness than indicators that were available in past studies (e.g., feeling understood by others for emotional isolation; time spent with others for physical isolation). Consequently, we recommend future research to examine whether there is a *causal* link between restrictive norms about social relationships and loneliness (e.g., with longitudinal designs), and to explore different indicators of physical, emotional, and perceived isolation.

Another limitation to the generalizability of our findings is that most research we integrated comes from European or North American countries. Combined with our own European perspective, this may have influenced the selection of variables and mechanisms in the culture-loneliness framework (e.g., emotional isolation may be viewed as less central by researchers from cultures that emphasize emotional closeness and intimacy less; Adams et al., 2012). Nevertheless, interview data reassuringly indicates that people from countries where individuals relate to each other in quite different ways (e.g., India, Egypt, and Austria) identify similar loneliness causes as the mostly Euro-American research literature (Heu et al., 2020). This suggests that the culture-loneliness framework can, at the very least, serve as important starting point to further develop a cultural psychology of loneliness—for instance, by filling different types of isolation with culture-specific meaning or through the addition of novel isolation types.

Furthermore, since most studies were hence arguably conducted in overall comparatively unrestrictive cultures, we do not yet know much about associations in more restrictive cultures (such as many cultures in Africa or Asia). For instance, individual-level associations between perceived isolation and loneliness may be stronger in more restrictive cultures because perceived isolation should have different practical meanings in less versus more restrictive cultures: In less restrictive cultures (e.g., a Canadian city), the perceived isolation of deviating from a cultural relationship norm (e.g., being a long-term single) may entail an unfulfilled personal relational desire, or negative perceptions by others or oneself. By contrast, in more restrictive cultures (e.g., an Indian village), the perceived isolation of breaching a relationship norm (e.g., choosing an "unsuitable" partner or divorcing) may lead to overt interpersonal rejection or even exclusion from the community. We thus recommend that future research should examine whether the culture-loneliness framework is also supported in cultures outside Europe or North America, and to examine cross-level interactions of culture-level restrictiveness with individual-level restrictiveness and types of isolation when predicting loneliness.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of paradoxical findings about culture and loneliness and the absence of an integrative framework to explain them, we proposed the culture-loneliness framework. This framework suggests that more restrictive (i.e., more, tighter, or more demanding) norms about social relationships protect from the risk of physical isolation (i.e., lacking social interaction or relationships in general). At the same time, they increase the risk for emotional and perceived isolation (i.e., lacking individually satisfying relationships or deviating from cultural norms about social relationships). Accordingly, loneliness should thrive in both more and less restrictive relationship cultures, but for different reasons. By integrating past findings about cultural norms and loneliness, we hope that the culture-loneliness framework can serve as a roadmap for future investigations in a cultural psychology of loneliness, with the aim of ultimately developing culture-specific interventions against loneliness.

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Notes

1. Most research at the cultural level has examined cultural differences by contrasting different *countries*. Importantly, country and culture cannot be set equal because there is, for example, much cultural variation within each country. Nevertheless, countries can be viewed as proxies for cultures, which is why we interpret these findings as culture-level findings.
2. In recent work by Barreto et al. (2020), higher collectivism at the cultural level was related to *lower* loneliness. Unlike the many studies that find the opposite, this research was mostly conducted in more individualistic samples.
3. Associations for relational stability were only weak and not consistent across samples.

4. Unlike tightness–looseness, restrictiveness can also be a characteristic of *single* cultural norms about social relationships.
5. *Emotional* loneliness is often distinguished from *social* loneliness to differentiate the loneliness that results from lacking at least one close relationship from the loneliness that results from lacking a social network (Weiss, 1973). We focus on any experience that individuals themselves label as loneliness. Nevertheless, the differentiation between *physical, emotional*, and *social* isolation can be viewed as somewhat related to emotional or social loneliness.
6. Although ideal social relationships are often set equal with *individually desired* social relationships, we suggest that *cultural norms* are equally important standards of comparison (De Jong Gierveld & Tesch-Römer, 2012). They influence individual desires and should impact on individual outcomes even if not internalized (Chiu et al., 2010).
7. Notably, country-level individualism-collectivism did not moderate this relationship, which is counter to what the culture-loneliness framework would predict.
8. Higher perceived relationship quality may also be interpreted as an indicator of less perceived isolation. Indeed, perceived relationship quality can be viewed as the result of a cognitive comparison between actual and ideal relationships (Johnson & Mullins, 1987; Perlman & Peplau, 1981), while unfavorable ideal-actual discrepancies regarding relationships define higher perceived isolation. As such, these results also support that less restrictive norms decrease the likelihood of perceived isolation and the thus resulting loneliness.

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