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Loneliness at the Top: A Study of Leadership Level, Gender Differences, and Perceived Emotional Support

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Abstract

Loneliness has increasingly been recognized as an important psychological experience within organizational and leadership contexts. Leadership roles often involve heightened responsibility, decision-making pressure, and relational distance, which may contribute to experiences of loneliness. The present study examined loneliness at the top among senior leaders and middle-level managers, with specific reference to leadership level, gender differences, and perceived emotional support. A quantitative research design employing comparative and correlational approaches was adopted. The sample consisted of 120 participants, including 60 senior leaders and 60 middle-level managers, selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected using an Information Schedule, the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3), and the Emotional Support Subscale of the MOS Social Support Survey. The results indicated no significant difference between senior leaders and middle-level managers with respect to loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support. A significant gender difference was observed among senior leaders, with male leaders reporting higher levels of loneliness than female leaders, while no gender differences were found among middle-level managers. No significant relationship was found between loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support. The findings highlight loneliness as a shared experience across leadership levels and underscore the importance of addressing emotional well-being in leadership roles.

Keywords: loneliness at the top; leadership; gender differences; perceived emotional support; organizational psychology

INTRODUCTION

Loneliness is a complex psychological phenomenon that has been examined across social, developmental, and organizational contexts. It is commonly defined as a subjective experience arising from a perceived discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Loneliness is not determined by the objective presence of people, but by the perceived quality and emotional meaningfulness of interpersonal connections. As a result, individuals may experience loneliness even when embedded within social, professional, or organizational networks (Weiss, 1973).

Weiss (1973) emphasized that loneliness reflects deficiencies in emotional and social connectedness rather than mere physical isolation. Research has consistently demonstrated that loneliness is associated with adverse psychological outcomes such as emotional distress, reduced well-being, and difficulties in coping with stress (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009). These findings highlight loneliness as an important psychological variable influencing adult functioning and mental health.

In contemporary organizational settings, loneliness has gained increasing attention as a factor affecting employee well-being and work-related outcomes. Organizational roles are embedded within structures of hierarchy, authority, and role expectations, all of which shape interpersonal interactions. Workplace relationships may become formal, role-bound, and influenced by power dynamics, thereby limiting opportunities for emotional expression and authentic interpersonal engagement (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). Under such conditions, experiences of loneliness may emerge despite frequent interaction with others.

Leadership roles represent a distinct organizational context in which loneliness may be particularly salient. Individuals occupying leadership positions are entrusted with decision-making authority, accountability for outcomes, and responsibility for others. As leaders progress within organizational hierarchies, their interpersonal relationships often change in nature. Interactions with subordinates may become evaluative and authority-driven, while access to peer relationships may reduce. This shift can contribute to psychological distance and emotional isolation (Kets de Vries, 1989).

The experience commonly described as loneliness at the top refers to the emotional and relational isolation associated with positions of leadership and authority. Leaders may perceive limited opportunities to express vulnerability, uncertainty, or emotional strain due to concerns related to role expectations, credibility, and professional image. The responsibility inherent in leadership roles, combined with restricted emotional disclosure, may intensify experiences of loneliness (Magee & Smith, 2013).

Gender may further influence experiences of loneliness in leadership roles. Social role expectations shape how men and women experience and express emotions within professional contexts (Eagly, 1987). Men in leadership positions may experience pressure to maintain emotional independence and control, whereas women leaders may encounter heightened relational expectations alongside leadership responsibilities (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These differing expectations may influence the experience of loneliness among leaders.

Perceived emotional support is an important factor in understanding loneliness within organizational contexts. Emotional support refers to the perception that one is understood, valued, and emotionally supported by others (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Social support theory suggests that perceived emotional support can buffer the psychological impact of stress and isolation. For leaders, emotional support may play a critical role in mitigating loneliness arising from role-based distance and responsibility.

Although loneliness has been examined in general and workplace populations, empirical research focusing specifically on loneliness among individuals in leadership positions remains limited, particularly within the Indian corporate context. Moreover, relatively few studies have examined loneliness by comparing leadership levels and gender while simultaneously considering perceived emotional support. The present study seeks to address these gaps by examining loneliness at the top among senior leaders and middle-level managers, with a focus on leadership position, gender differences, and perceived emotional support.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Loneliness has been widely studied as a psychological construct and is understood as a subjective emotional experience resulting from perceived deficiencies in social relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Early theoretical work emphasized that loneliness is not synonymous with social isolation but reflects dissatisfaction with the quality of interpersonal connections (Weiss, 1973). Empirical studies have consistently linked loneliness with negative psychological outcomes such as emotional distress, depressive symptoms, and reduced overall well-being (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009).

In organizational settings, loneliness has emerged as an important factor influencing employee attitudes and behavior. Wright, Burt, and Strongman (2006) introduced the concept of workplace loneliness and found that employees experiencing loneliness at work reported lower job satisfaction and higher emotional strain. Similarly, Ozcelik and Barsade (2018) reported that workplace loneliness was negatively related to organizational commitment and performance, suggesting that loneliness has implications not only for individual well-being but also for organizational effectiveness.

While much of the research on workplace loneliness has focused on employees, relatively fewer studies have examined loneliness among individuals in leadership roles. Leadership positions are characterized by authority, responsibility, and hierarchical distance, which may alter the nature of workplace relationships. Kets de Vries (1989) suggested that leaders often experience psychological isolation due to their positional power, as subordinates may withhold honest feedback and emotional openness. This lack of reciprocal relationships may contribute to feelings of loneliness among leaders.

Research examining the role of power in interpersonal relationships supports this view. Anderson and Berdahl (2002) found that individuals in positions of power tend to experience greater social distance from others. Magee and Smith (2013) further proposed that power influences social cognition and behavior, often reducing emotional disclosure and relational reciprocity. These dynamics may limit opportunities for meaningful emotional connection among leaders, thereby increasing vulnerability to loneliness.

The phenomenon commonly referred to as loneliness at the top has been discussed in leadership and executive literature. Wright (2012) reported that senior leaders frequently experience emotional isolation due to the burden of responsibility and the absence of peers with whom they can openly share concerns. Similarly, Kets de Vries and Miller (1984) noted that leaders may adopt emotional detachment as a coping mechanism to manage stress, which may further reinforce feelings of isolation.

Gender differences in leadership experiences have also been documented in the literature. Social role theory posits that men and women are socialized into different emotional and relational roles, which may influence their experiences in leadership positions (Eagly, 1987). Research suggests that men in leadership roles often experience pressure to display emotional control and independence, potentially limiting emotional disclosure (Schramm, 2003). Women leaders, on the other hand, may face heightened relational expectations alongside leadership responsibilities, which may contribute to emotional strain and isolation (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Perceived emotional support has been identified as a significant factor in understanding loneliness. Emotional support refers to the perception that one is understood, valued, and emotionally supported by others (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Studies have shown that perceived emotional support is associated with reduced stress and improved psychological well-being (Halbesleben, 2006). In organizational contexts, emotional support from colleagues and supervisors has been found to buffer the negative effects of workplace stress and isolation.

Despite growing interest in workplace loneliness and leadership stress, empirical research focusing specifically on loneliness among senior leaders remains limited. Most studies examine loneliness among employees rather than individuals in positions of authority. Furthermore, few studies have examined loneliness as a multidimensional construct in leadership contexts or explored differences based on leadership level and gender. Within the Indian corporate context, research on loneliness at the top is particularly scarce. The present study seeks to address these gaps by examining loneliness at the top among corporate leaders and middle-level managers, with a focus on leadership position, gender differences, and perceived emotional support.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Is there a difference between senior leaders and middle-level managers with respect to loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support?

Are there gender differences among senior leaders and middle-level managers with respect to loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support?

Is there a relationship between loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support among senior leaders and middle-level managers?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To examine whether there are differences between senior leaders and middle-level managers with respect to loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support.

To examine whether there are gender differences among senior leaders and middle-level managers with respect to loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support.

To examine whether there is a relationship between loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support among senior leaders and middle-level managers.

HYPOTHESES

H1

There will be a difference between senior leaders and middle-level managers with respect to

(A) loneliness at the top and

(B) perceived emotional support.

H2

There will be gender differences with respect to

(A) loneliness at the top and

(B) perceived emotional support

among senior leaders.

H3

There will be gender differences with respect to

(A) loneliness at the top and

(B) perceived emotional support

among middle-level managers.

H4

There will be a relationship between

(A) loneliness at the top and

(B) perceived emotional support

among senior leaders.

H5

There will be a relationship between

(A) loneliness at the top and

(B) perceived emotional support

among middle-level managers

METHOD

Research Design

The present study adopts a comparative research design to examine whether there are differences between senior leaders and middle-level managers with respect to loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support. In addition, the study employs a correlational design to examine the relationship between loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support among senior leaders and middle-level managers.

Sample

The sample consisted of 120 corporate professionals, comprising 60 senior leaders and 60 middle-level managers, selected using non-probability purposive sampling. Participants were drawn from corporate organizations across different sectors in India. Senior leaders included individuals occupying top management positions with strategic decision-making authority, while middle-level managers included individuals responsible for operational and team management roles.

Inclusion Criteria

For senior leaders:

Must be employed in a corporate organization
Must be occupying a senior leadership or top management position
Must have a minimum of five years of total work experience
Must have at least two years of experience in a leadership role
Must be able to read and understand English
For middle-level managers:
Must be employed in a corporate organization
Must be occupying a middle-level managerial position
Must have a minimum of five years of total work experience
Must be managing a team or department
Must be able to read and understand English

Exclusion Criteria

Individuals who were self-employed, freelancers, or consultants
Individuals not holding managerial or leadership roles
Individuals working on a contractual or temporary basis

INSTRUMENTS

The present study used the following three instruments:

Information Schedule

UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3)
Emotional Support Subscale of the MOS Social Support Survey

Information Schedule

The Information Schedule was used to collect demographic and work-related details of the participants. Participants were asked to provide information regarding their age, gender, educational qualification, total years of work experience, current designation, leadership level (senior leader or middle-level manager), number of years in the current role, and organizational sector. The information obtained through this schedule was used to classify participants into relevant groups for analysis.

UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3)

Loneliness was measured using the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) developed by Russell (1996). The scale consists of 20 items designed to assess subjective feelings of loneliness and social isolation. The scale is a 4-point Likert-type scale with response options ranging from Never to Often. Higher scores indicate higher levels of perceived loneliness.

The scale includes both positively and negatively worded items. Reverse scoring was applied to the positively worded items before computing the total score. After reverse scoring, the scores of all 20 items were summed to obtain a total loneliness score. The UCLA Loneliness Scale has demonstrated high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients reported between 0.89 and 0.94, and has shown good construct validity in previous research.

Emotional Support Subscale (MOS Social Support Survey)

Perceived emotional support was assessed using the Emotional Support Subscale of the Medical Outcomes Study (MOS) Social Support Survey developed by Sherbourne and Stewart (1991). The subscale consists of 5 items that measure the extent to which individuals perceive emotional understanding, care, and support from others.

Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from None of the time to All of the time. The scores of all five items were summed to obtain a total emotional support score, with higher scores indicating higher perceived emotional support. The scale has demonstrated good internal consistency and construct validity in organizational and psychological research.

PROCEDURE

After selecting the appropriate measures, corporate professionals occupying senior leadership and middle-level managerial positions were identified and approached through professional networks and organizational contacts. During the initial contact, participants were briefed about the nature and purpose of the study. Those who agreed to participate provided informed consent.

Following consent, participants were requested to complete the Information Schedule. Subsequently, the questionnaires assessing loneliness and perceived emotional support were administered. Clear written instructions were provided to the participants regarding how to respond to the items. Participants were encouraged to seek clarification if they had any doubts while responding.

There was no time limit imposed for completing the questionnaires; however, participants were requested to complete the questionnaires within approximately 15–20 minutes. The responses were collected anonymously to ensure confidentiality. The data obtained were coded and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Based on the results, interpretations and conclusions were drawn.

RESULTS

The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to test the stated hypotheses. Mean scores, standard deviations, t values, and levels of significance were computed to examine differences between senior leaders and middle-level managers, as well as gender differences within each leadership group. Pearson's product–moment correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationship between loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support. All statistical tests were two-tailed.

Table 1

Mean, Standard Deviation and t Value for Loneliness at the Top and Perceived Emotional Support among Senior Leaders and Middle-Level Managers (N = 120)

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	t
Loneliness at the Top	Senior Leaders	60	49.15	5.01	
	Middle-Level Managers	60	50.32	4.96	-1.28
Perceived Emotional Support	Senior Leaders	60	14.78	3.08	
	Middle-Level Managers	60	14.75	3.54	0.06

Note: $p \geq 0.05$ (two-tailed)

Interpretation

Table 1 indicates that there is no statistically significant difference between senior leaders and middle-level managers with respect to loneliness at the top ($t = -1.28$, $p \geq 0.05$). Hence, Hypothesis H1 (A) was rejected.

Table 1 also indicates that there is no statistically significant difference between senior leaders and middle-level managers with respect to perceived emotional support ($t = 0.06$, $p \geq 0.05$). Hence, Hypothesis H1 (B) was rejected.

Table 2

Mean, Standard Deviation and t Value for Loneliness at the Top among Senior Leaders by Gender (N = 60)

Gender	N	Mean	SD	t
Male	30	50.70	5.45	2.50*
Female	30	47.60	4.04	

*Note: $p \leq 0.05$ (two-tailed)

Interpretation

Table 2 indicates a statistically significant gender difference in loneliness at the top among senior leaders ($t = 2.50$, $p \leq 0.05$). As indicated by the mean scores, male senior leaders reported higher levels of loneliness compared to female senior leaders. Hence, Hypothesis H2 (A) was accepted. No statistically significant gender difference was found with respect to perceived emotional support among senior leaders ($p \geq 0.05$). Hence, Hypothesis H2 (B) was rejected.

Table 3

Mean, Standard Deviation and t Value for Loneliness at the Top among Middle-Level Managers by Gender (N = 60)

Gender	N	Mean	SD	t
Male	30	50.83	5.48	0.81
Female	30	49.80	4.41	

Note: $p \geq 0.05$ (two-tailed)

Interpretation

Table 3 indicates that there is no statistically significant gender difference in loneliness at the top among middle-level managers ($t = 0.81$, $p \geq 0.05$). Hence, Hypothesis H3 (A) was rejected.

No statistically significant gender difference was found with respect to perceived emotional support among middle-level managers ($p \geq 0.05$). Hence, Hypothesis H3 (B) was rejected.

Table 4
Correlation between Loneliness at the Top and Perceived Emotional Support among Senior Leaders and Middle-Level Managers (N = 120)

Group	r
Senior Leaders	-0.06
Middle-Level Managers	-0.22

Note: $p \geq 0.05$ (two-tailed)
Interpretation
Table 4 indicates that the relationship between loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support was not statistically significant among senior leaders ($r = -0.06$, $p \geq 0.05$). Hence, Hypothesis H4 was rejected. Table 4 also indicates that the relationship between loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support was not statistically significant among middle-level managers ($r = -0.22$, $p \geq 0.05$). Hence, Hypothesis H5 was rejected.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The findings of the present study reveal that:
Hypothesis H1 (A) and H1 (B) were rejected, indicating no significant differences between senior leaders and middle-level managers with respect to loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support.
Hypothesis H2 (A) was accepted, indicating a significant gender difference in loneliness at the top among senior leaders.
Hypothesis H3 (A) was rejected, indicating no significant gender difference in loneliness at the top among middle-level managers.
Hypotheses H4 and H5 were rejected, indicating no significant relationship between loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support among senior leaders and middle-level managers.

DISCUSSION

The objective of the present study was to examine whether there are differences between senior leaders and middle-level managers with respect to loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support. The study also aimed to examine whether there are gender differences among senior leaders and middle-level managers with respect to loneliness at the top. Further, the study sought to examine whether there is a relationship between loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support among senior leaders and middle-level managers.
The findings of the present study revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between senior leaders and middle-level managers with respect to loneliness at the top. This indicates that feelings of loneliness are experienced across leadership levels and are not restricted only to individuals occupying the highest positions in organizational hierarchies. While senior leaders may experience isolation due to increased responsibility and limited peer interaction, middle-level managers may also experience loneliness due to their intermediary role between senior leadership and subordinates. Thus, loneliness appears to be a shared experience across leadership roles.
The results of the present study also indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between senior leaders and middle-level managers with respect to perceived emotional support. This suggests that leaders at different hierarchical levels may perceive similar levels of emotional support within their

organizational environments. This may be attributed to organizational norms that emphasize task performance and professionalism, which may limit opportunities for emotional expression and support across leadership positions.

The present study further revealed a statistically significant gender difference in loneliness at the top among senior leaders, with male senior leaders reporting higher levels of loneliness compared to female senior leaders. This finding suggests that gender may play a role in shaping emotional experiences at higher levels of leadership. Male senior leaders may experience greater expectations to function independently and maintain emotional restraint, which may contribute to increased feelings of loneliness. Female senior leaders, on the other hand, may engage more actively in interpersonal relationships, which could help reduce experiences of loneliness.

In contrast, the findings indicated that there was no statistically significant gender difference in loneliness at the top among middle-level managers. This suggests that male and female middle-level managers experience similar levels of loneliness in their roles. The nature of middle-level managerial roles, which often involve frequent interaction with teams and peers, may reduce the influence of gender-based differences on emotional experiences such as loneliness.

The results of the present study also indicated that there was no statistically significant relationship between loneliness at the top and perceived emotional support among senior leaders and middle-level managers. Although a negative relationship was observed, the relationship was not strong enough to reach statistical significance. This suggests that perceived emotional support alone may not be sufficient to explain experiences of loneliness in leadership roles. Other factors such as role demands, responsibility, decision-making pressure, and organizational expectations may contribute to feelings of loneliness among leaders.

Overall, the findings of the present study suggest that loneliness at the top is a complex experience influenced by leadership roles and organizational contexts rather than leadership level alone. Gender differences were evident only among senior leaders, indicating that gender-related expectations may become more salient at higher levels of leadership. The absence of a significant relationship between loneliness and perceived emotional support highlights the need to consider broader organizational and role-related factors when examining loneliness among leaders.

In the light of the present study, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The study was limited to a specific group of senior leaders and middle-level managers, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the use of self-report measures may be influenced by response biases. Future research may include leaders from diverse organizational contexts and explore additional factors such as leadership role demands, organizational culture, and decision-making responsibilities to gain a more comprehensive understanding of loneliness at the top.

CONCLUSION

The present study sought to examine loneliness at the top among individuals in leadership roles, with specific reference to leadership level, gender differences, and perceived emotional support. By focusing on senior leaders and middle-level managers, the study aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of loneliness within organizational leadership contexts.

The findings of the study indicate that loneliness is not confined exclusively to the highest levels of leadership. Senior leaders and middle-level managers reported comparable levels of loneliness, suggesting that leadership roles across hierarchical levels may involve similar emotional challenges. The results

further revealed that gender differences in loneliness were evident only among senior leaders, with male leaders reporting higher levels of loneliness than their female counterparts. No gender differences were observed among middle-level managers.

The study also found that perceived emotional support was not significantly related to loneliness at the top among either senior leaders or middle-level managers. This suggests that loneliness in leadership roles may be influenced by factors beyond perceived emotional support, such as role expectations, responsibility, and organizational dynamics.

Overall, the findings highlight loneliness at the top as a meaningful psychological experience that warrants greater attention in organizational and leadership research. Understanding loneliness among leaders has important implications for leadership development, organizational well-being, and the design of supportive workplace environments. Future research may further explore contextual and organizational factors that shape loneliness in leadership roles and examine interventions aimed at addressing the emotional well-being of leaders.

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