

# Loneliness in the Dutch Youth Context

A qualitative study on loneliness among adolescents with a non-Western ethnic background

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# LONELINESS AMONG NON-WESTERN ADOLESCENTS

**Word of thanks**

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**Abstract**

This study complements earlier research on loneliness during adolescence by adding insight in the non-Western adolescent's contextual experiences of loneliness in the peer – and family environment in the Netherlands, and addresses the following questions: *To what extent do non-Western adolescents experience their ethnic status as contributing to loneliness?* and *Which protective factors are experienced by non-Western adolescents as a buffer against loneliness?*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted among 15 Dutch-born and foreign-born non-Western adolescents, aged 15-24. The following factors may increase their vulnerability: 1) a disconnection from peers, 2) experiencing difficulties in making contact, and 3) a lack of parental communication. In the context of peers, the majority of the respondents indicated to experience loneliness because of their ethnic minority position. The main barrier for connecting to peers is lacking common interests or in the case of immigrant adolescents, possessing insufficient Dutch proficiency. Family-related loneliness occurs when parents lack sufficient Dutch proficiency. Buffers for loneliness are: 1) having a close friend, 2) recognition in peers, 3) satisfactory parental communication, and 4) external support. This study provides suggestions for practitioners and strategies in the school context will be most far-reaching, since this is the context in which respondents experience loneliness most.

*Keywords:* qualitative research, loneliness, ethnic minority, non-Western adolescents, the Netherlands

### **Samenvatting**

Deze studie vult eerder onderzoek over eenzaamheid onder adolescenten aan, door inzicht te bieden in contextuele ervaringen van eenzaamheid in de context van leeftijdsgenoten en de familiesfeer in Nederland, en behandelt twee vragen: *In hoeverre ervaren niet-Westerse jongeren dat hun etnische status bijdraagt aan eenzaamheid?* en *Welke beschermfactoren dienen als buffer tegen eenzaamheid onder niet-Westerse jongeren?*

Semigestructureerde interviews zijn afgenomen onder 15, zowel in Nederland als in het buitenland geboren adolescenten, in de leeftijd 15 tot 24 jaar. Factoren die kwetsbaarheid voor eenzaamheid vergroten, zijn: 1) een disconnectie van leeftijdsgenoten, 2) moeilijkheden ervaren in het maken van contact en 3) een gebrek aan ouderlijke communicatie. In de context van leeftijdsgenoten geeft de meerderheid van de respondenten geeft aan eenzaamheid te ervaren. De grootste barrière om verbindingen aan te gaan met leeftijdsgenoten, is het gebrek aan gemeenschappelijke interesses of in het geval van immigrant adolescenten, een onvoldoende beheersing van de Nederlandse taal. Familie-gerelateerde eenzaamheid komt voor wanneer ouders Nederlandse taalvaardigheid missen. Factoren die bufferen tegen eenzaamheid, zijn: 1) het hebben van een goede vriend(in), 2) herkenning in leeftijdsgenoten, 3) voldoende oudercommunicatie, en 4) externe steun. Deze studie verschaft suggesties voor de praktijk en strategieën in de schoolcontext zullen het meest verrijkend zijn, aangezien dit de context is waarin de respondenten eenzaamheid het meest ervaren.

*Kernwoorden:* kwalitatief onderzoek, eenzaamheid, etnische minderheden, niet-Westerse adolescenten, Nederland

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*“Loneliness is like hunger. A signal from your body that encourages you to take action. When you feel hungry, you look for food. With loneliness, you look for social contacts. Just like hunger, loneliness is normal. But what if you cannot find food or do not dare to eat? Then hunger becomes a problem. If you feel alone for a long time, loneliness then becomes a problem”.<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction**

According to Van Tilburg & De Jong Gierveld (2007) loneliness is the subjective experience of an unpleasant lack of social relationships, either quantitatively or qualitatively. In line with the above mentioned quote, Qualter et al. (2015) state that people of all ages are motivated to reconnect with others when confronted with aversive feelings of loneliness. These feelings can be interpreted as a result of unmet or unsatisfactory needs within an individual’s social network. It is possible for people who live relatively solitary lives to not feel lonely, and contrarily, people with a rich social life can feel lonely nevertheless (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). The quantity of social contact does not necessarily protect against loneliness, but within a small social network it is possible to have one or two meaningful relationships that can reduce the risk of loneliness (Van Tilburg & De Jong Gierveld, 2007).

A group that is often mentioned for being at particular risk to experience loneliness, are adolescents. As adolescence can be considered a turbulent period and it is not uncommon for adolescents to feel lonely periodically since they spend an increasing time on their own (Martin, Wood, Houghton, Carroll & Hattie, 2014; Qualter et al., 2015). The percentage of people that “sometimes” or “often” feel lonely is higher among adolescents than in any other age group (Qualter et al., 2015), between 3 and 22% of adolescents chronically experiences loneliness (van Dulmen and Goossens, 2013). It is important to find measures to prevent loneliness or ease loneliness. Once occurring, it can lead to negative consequences for both mental and physical health, including depression, suicidal ideation, aggression, obesity and cardiovascular diseases (Cacioppo, Grippo, London, Goossens & Cacioppo, 2015). Research has often highlighted intrapersonal factors, such as personality traits (e.g. introversion and low social skills), as important risk factors for loneliness (Goossens, 2012; Mahon et al., 2006).

In this qualitative study I aim to investigate how an immigration background is linked to loneliness, exploring which factors enhance loneliness. My second aim is to investigate whether there are protective factors, family- and peer-related, that buffer against loneliness

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<sup>1</sup> <https://idemrotterdam.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Kenniskaart-jongeren-en-eenzaamheid.pdf>, consulted on 10-02-2020

among Dutch-born and foreign born non-Western adolescents. Non-Western adolescents are those born in or descending from countries outside of Western Europe and North America.

### **Theoretical and empirical subsection**

Loneliness reflects the functional disruption of relationships and is often accompanied by unpleasant feelings and negative perceptions of one's self (Goswick & Jones, 1982). A theoretical view offered by Weiss (1973) has often been mentioned in studies on loneliness. According to his conceptualization, there are two forms of loneliness: 'social loneliness' refers to the physical absence of a network of social relationships and 'emotional loneliness' equals the absence of a close, satisfactory attachment. Regarding social loneliness, Hawkey and Cacioppo (2010) suggest that perceived social isolation is equivalent to feeling unsafe as lonely people tend to view the social world as a more threatening place and expect more negative social interactions.

Adolescents are prone to encounter multiple new settings such as entering a new school. Whereas some adolescents have the capacity of establishing new relations easily, others may experience more difficulty in connecting to others which may lead to feelings of loneliness (Uruk & Demir, 2003). The social needs theory (Weiss, 1973) suggests that when important social needs — such as acceptance by one's peer group — are not met, loneliness will arise. Furthermore, this theory emphasizes that different social relationships may fulfil different social needs. This is in line with what is stated by Maes, Vanhalst, Spithoven, Van den Noortgate and Goossens (2016), namely that adolescents may feel lonely in certain relationships (e.g., their parents), but not in others (e.g., their peers). It is relevant to investigate whether aspects in one relationship may compensate for aspects that are absent in another relationship. I hypothesize that when non-Western ethnic adolescents feel less connected to their parents, they will increasingly need support of their ethnically similar friend(s).

Studies have shown the relevance of distinguishing between ethnicities in relation to loneliness. A study conducted in Australia by Priest, Perry, Ferdinand, Paradies and Kelaher, (2014) found higher levels of loneliness among ethnic minority students compared to the majority group students. Van Bergen, Van Balkom, Smit and Saharso (2011) revealed in a Dutch study, that Turkish adolescents felt lonelier than adolescents with a Moroccan immigrant or non-immigrant background. This is partly explained by the fact that problems could not be discussed within the family context. This may lead to feeling alienated, disconnected, and misunderstood, which are all components related to loneliness (Segrin, Nevarez, Arroyo, & Harwood, 2012). In a study conducted in Denmark by Madsen et al., (2016a), one of their

findings suggest that adolescents, who defined themselves with another ethnicity than Danish, had significantly higher odds for loneliness than adolescents who identified with the Danish majority. Another study by Madsen et al (2016b) showed that adolescents who did not belong to the ethnic majority in the school class had increased odds for loneliness compared to adolescents that belonged to the ethnic majority. Adolescents who immigrated relatively recently often face challenges as a result of their acculturation (e.g. learning a new language) while normal developmental changes of adolescence may occur simultaneously (Neto, 2002; Rogers-Sirin, Ryce, & Sirin, 2014). This group may therefore be vulnerable to loneliness for different reasons. The second hypothesis is: having more same-ethnic classmates lowered the odds for loneliness.

In contrast, there are also studies that did not find an association between ethnicity and loneliness. Neto (2002) conducted a study in Portugal and found no significant differences between adolescents from immigrant families and Portuguese adolescents who have never migrated. A survey report among New Zealanders of 15 years and older showed that, except for those who identified as Asian, identifying with other ethnic groups showed no significant association with feeling lonely.<sup>2</sup> These contrasting findings show the complexity and unambiguity of the relationship between ethnicity and loneliness.

### **Present study**

Some studies show that ethnic minorities are more vulnerable to loneliness compared to adolescents who belong to the ethnic majority. However, to my knowledge, qualitative research conducted among non-Western adolescents and their experience of loneliness, is limited. Assuming that ethnic status can foster loneliness, qualitative data could be helpful to gain more insight into how and why adolescents with an immigrant background experience loneliness. It is stated that, differences amongst cultures and the way people's social relations are organized may result in cross-cultural variations of experiencing and coping with loneliness (Rokach, Orzeck, Cripps, Lackovic-Grgin, & Penezic, 2001). This qualitative study focuses on the following research questions:

*To what extent do non-Western adolescents experience their ethnic status as contributing to loneliness?*

and

*Which protective factors buffer non-Western adolescents against loneliness?*

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<sup>2</sup> [http://archive.stats.govt.nz/browse\\_for\\_stats/people\\_and\\_communities/older\\_people/loneliness-in-nz-2010-NZGSS.aspx](http://archive.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/people_and_communities/older_people/loneliness-in-nz-2010-NZGSS.aspx), consulted on 16-02-2020

The current study is part of a research project in collaboration with the Join us foundation that seeks to attract a more culturally diverse target group. The foundation is situated in the Netherlands and developed a programme that targets adolescents from the age of 12 to 25 who experience loneliness. Currently they have treated 440 adolescents since 2016 by improving their social competence to reduce feelings of loneliness.<sup>3</sup> The results of this research are expected to have both scientific and practical value aiming at adolescents' wellbeing and their societal engagement within the Dutch context.

### **Method**

#### **Procedure**

Participants for this study were mostly recruited through youth workers known by the Join us foundation and through other Dutch foundations involved in social issues concerning youth and research institutes, such as Movisie and the Argan foundation. Respondents emailed me personally when they had seen the recruitment post on the Join us foundation website or Facebook page. Snowball sampling also occurred when respondents suggested friends who were also willing to participate. Initially, it was difficult to recruit participants since the sensitive topic of loneliness might have discouraged adolescents to participate. I rephrased the topic of the study by stating that the study focuses on exploring the non-Western adolescents' social life and the connection to others. This led to the recruitment of sufficient respondents.

Telephone contact was made with potential respondents to explain the purpose of the research and when willing to cooperate, a date for the interview was scheduled. The location of the three live interviews depended on the respondent's place of residence and the exact location was discussed beforehand. Other interviews were conducted through a Skype or Whatsapp videocall due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The selection of respondents was not location bound. Requirements for selection were: currently living in the Netherlands, having a non-Western background and belonging to the age target group of 15 to 25. When requested, a youth worker accompanied respondents during the interview. The length of the interviews varied between 30 and 60 minutes. Incentives were incorporated in the form of a voucher which was handed over personally or by mail after completing the interview. The matters of confidentiality, anonymity, and secrecy were respected throughout the data collection.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.join-us.nu/professionals/>, consulted on 06-01-2020

### **Participants**

The sample comprised a total of 15 adolescents, seven male and eight female adolescents between the ages of 15 to 24, of whom eight were born in the Netherlands and seven born outside the Netherlands (see Table 1), either with current, past or no experiences of loneliness.

### **Measuring instruments**

In qualitative research, goal is to understand how people give meaning to their social world by posing questions concerning their behaviour, ideas, attitudes and experiences (Rich & Ginsburg, 1999). Loneliness carries a social stigma and for this reason researchers should not be surprised that few people would admit feeling lonely (Madsen et al., 2016a). Therefore, it is relevant to conduct a study in which the respondent can choose their own words in talking about loneliness. Questions were framed to explore adolescents' perceptions and experiences of feeling lonely, being alone, and how they think their ethnicity plays a role in this (see Appendix A). Questions regarding loneliness were carefully phrased to minimize any potential negative impact upon the respondent. The questions assessed adolescents' perceptions of loneliness, and aloneness, the causes of loneliness including ethnicity and family situation and various dimensions of coping with loneliness; what the respondent would like to see differently, how they would improve their situation and who or what is needed that might help them to achieve this. Lastly, questions regarding the program of the Join us foundation were asked to discover whether the respondent would consider to join such a therapeutic group session.

### **Design & data analysis**

Grounded theory is applied as a qualitative research methodology that allows theory to emerge from the collected data by the process of collecting data, coding data and making connections between categories (Urquhart, 2013). The interviews were transcribed and data were analysed through constant comparison. The purpose is to describe the variation that is found within a certain phenomenon and to indicate in which situations the phenomenon, in this case loneliness, manifests itself (Boeije, 2010) forming conceptual categories, relationships, and theory. This method applies to this research since loneliness manifests itself in different ways when circumstances vary. NVivo software is used for textual data analysis and theory construction. The data were analysed through open, axial coding and selective coding (Boeije, 2010) to detect themes and the most relevant categories were grouped together (see Figure 1). The findings are categorized as follows: Factors enhancing loneliness consist of three categories: 1)

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disconnection from peers, 2) experiencing difficulties in making contact and 3) lack of parental communication. The protective factors consist of four categories: 1) having a close friend, 2) recognition in peers, 3) Satisfactory parental communication and 4) External support (including Joining a therapeutic group session).

### Results

Table 1

*Individual and Family Characteristics of the Sample*

Characteristic	Frequency
<b>Current education</b>	
VMBO “Preparatory secondary vocational education”	1
VWO “University preparatory education”	1
MBO “Vocational education and training”	5
HBO “Higher professional education”	3
WO “Research-oriented education”(Bachelor Program)	2
Doctorate (PhD)	2
Not studying	1
<b>Country of birth</b>	
Afghanistan	1
Brazil	1
Ecuador	1
Syria	4
The Netherlands	8
<b>Country of birth (Father)</b>	
Afghanistan	1
Brazil	1
Colombia	1
Indonesia	1
Morocco	5
Syria	4
Turkey	2
<b>Country of birth (Mother)</b>	
Afghanistan	1
Algeria	1
Brazil	1
Colombia	1
Indonesia	1
Morocco	4
Syria	4
Turkey	2

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Self-identified ethnicity	
Brazilian	1
Dutch	1
Dutch-Afghan	1
Dutch-Moroccan	4
Dutch-Indonesian	1
Dutch-Turkish	1
Moroccan	1
Palestinian-Syrian-Dutch	1
Syrian	3
'Cosmopolitan'	1

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*Note.*  $N = 15$

Adolescents could experience feelings of loneliness for a short amount of time but do not necessarily consider themselves as lonely. Furthermore, it might be confronting to attach the label *lonely* to oneself. Respondents may therefore rather mention that he or she almost solely spends time with family but wishes to spend time with peers or wishes to have more friends. Three female respondents mentioned past or current feelings of loneliness explicitly. This may be because these respondents felt more comfortable since the interviewer has the same gender. The self-identified ethnicity did not offer a clear pattern with regard to loneliness to include in the result section, except for one respondent who identified himself as 'cosmopolitan' (see Table 1). For example, those who identified as Dutch-Moroccan contained respondents who experience current loneliness as well as respondents who do not experience loneliness at the moment or only for a short time in the past. The immigrant adolescents also seemed to have difficulty understanding question "Which description suits you? I feel...", which was phrased in Dutch (see Appendix B). When relevant, information will be provided regarding the ethnicity, that could otherwise not be directly derived from a quote.

In this study, all quotes are translated from Dutch to English. The original quotes can be obtained from the author. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identity.

### ***Factors enhancing loneliness***

#### **1. Disconnection from peers**

Feelings of loneliness for adolescents appear to be strongly related to their feelings of

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disconnection from their peers, often expressed by mentioning a mismatch between them and others. A Dutch Moroccan respondent expressed current feelings of loneliness:

*“I have been very lonely since I started studying because compared to my fellow students I have a whole different living environment. I am a student at the University of Amsterdam and that is known for.. it is quite a white university(...) and I really grew up amid all kinds of cultures and ethnicities. I really had to switch from mix to white. (...) I have tried, since I am actually really outgoing, but then I sometimes did not understand what was said in a conversation, a different kind of humour or they discussed things I could not relate to.” (Female, 21)*

Another respondent shared a moment of loneliness when she started her Bachelor’s:

*“There was literally a girl who said to me “wow I’ve never seen a Moroccan” [laughs] so things like that. (...) I think that is mainly a challenge, I am someone who has a very strong opinion when it comes to racism, discrimination or certain statements that are really unacceptable (...) But if you are in a situation where there are people around you who do all of that, and are completely unaware of it (...) then you will no longer express that opinion, then you know you really don’t know what to do anymore. And then .. yes I think that must have been a moment of loneliness.” (Female, 24)*

What stands out here is that the respondent ends by saying it was a *moment* of loneliness rather than continuous. This example gives an idea of the complexity of loneliness. She added that it is sometimes difficult to put into words what is being felt at a particular moment:

*“I had dinner with a friend for her birthday. And she is one of my best friends, she is a white-Dutch, and her friends are actually all white except for me. I noticed that I could not really join the conversation at the table, then I thought okay..this is yes.. maybe you feel something like loneliness.. Because, you do your best to talk but it is not those things... I can't really talk about going out, pubs, drinking alcohol, wine ... no idea. Maybe.. I don't know if that's loneliness ... maybe just a feeling of being left out.”*

For some adolescents, being aware that you differ in ethnicity may give an extra, possibly negative, dimension to a change of environment. When starting a new school, feelings of uncertainty or even loneliness may appear as a common experience during adolescence. However, it may be even more challenging when lacking social skills and/or being culturally

different. Nadia, just started her Bachelor's, explained difficulties in talking to her fellow students and rarely sees her classmates outside the University:

*"Yes once. With a few others that make it easier for me to get along, especially because we have the same background, we are all Indonesian or uh Indo, half and uh [half Indonesian, half Dutch] so yes .. especially those two groups (...) That is something that makes it easier for us to talk." (Female, 19)*

In her case, a disconnection from peers coincided with a period of change, such as starting a new education. Her example gives the impression that it might be the case that some adolescents feel more comfortable among those who appear to be having a shared ethnic background.

The position of feeling an outsider in a culturally dominant peer group was addressed by multiple respondents. No cases of overt rejection or maltreatment (e.g. getting bullied) were reported. However, it still gave some respondents a feeling of a lack of enjoyment and having to deal with, in their perception, unchangeable circumstances:

*"Basically, my high school social life was about explaining people what Islam is and explaining why I don't drink (...) But that really put me into some sort of separation, Everyone went out, everyone went to the prom and I was sitting on the couch at home, I was radical, not like that, but you really end up in loneliness (...) it was a very white school." (Male, 23)*

*"(...) at my previous work there was a kind of a borrel [drinking] culture, so then it is nice if you join, so you do feel a certain pressure. (...) I never really understood the fun of it, just sitting at a table with a drink, that's it. And then most of the time that drink is alcoholic, but not my drink. And then usually it went like "yes and this weekend I'm going to do this and do that" and those are all things that I have nothing [in common with]. And that doesn't matter, but I can't join the conversation." (Female, 24)*

## **2. Experiencing difficulties in making contact**

In one respondents' case, periods of change, such as starting a new education, made it difficult to have conversations with fellow students. Additionally, she also acknowledges her lack of social skills which, in her case, resulted in feeling more comfortable talking online to others than face to face:

*"..because I find it easier to get in touch via the internet, it is easier to find out (...) common things you are both interested in and because it is not face to face it is easier*

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*to talk on the one hand (...) in my mind it feels easier when you talk to people via the internet". (Female, 19)*

Here, in a real life situation, she feels more comfortable to start a conversation with visually ethnically similar peers. However, when talking online to others, this preference does no longer play a role and common interests were the basis to start a conversation:

*"I (...) follow those fan pages where they post updates about your favourite idol or (...) series and then I get in touch with the one who uh...is behind the account and I start several conversations and then .. uh .. yes then we automatically become friends and happily also with a few Dutch people I met [online]. I actually met them [in real life] and I still speak to them occasionally."*

Furthermore, foreign-born respondents also experience difficulties making social contact when they notice their language proficiency is not on the same level compared to others:

*" (...) honestly it is a bit difficult to talk to the boy and girl at the same time, get acquainted and so on. For example, like me, I find it a little bit ..language is still a little bit difficult for me, I can understand a lot of words, but now I find it hard to talk .. I don't know the best way [to use] the words or the sentence." (Male, 22)*

Another respondent who was the only non-Dutch in her class mentioned:

*"I was in a class with only Dutch people when I went to vavo [secondary adult education] at HAVO level last year. And yes it was just very strange for me because everything is different and .. yes I could not easily have a conversation with the students (...) But also during the break they also had their friends so I was actually just sitting on my chair, on my phone. I can speak Dutch but yes I don't know, it is a strange feeling. If I speak, will I be able to continue the conversation? How will it go? Such questions then came to mind. (Female, 19)*

### **3. Lack of parental communication**

While the first two factors discussed loneliness related to peers, this factor concerns the experience of loneliness in the family environment. A lack of parental communication, whether intentionally or not, is experienced by multiple respondents. This is experienced when a respondent does not have the idea that he or she can share feelings or personal information at home, for example due to the parents' limited Dutch proficiency. All respondents who were born in the Netherlands reported being more comfortable sharing

concerns in the Dutch language. When experiencing a language barrier, respondents to find ways to share information:

*“(...) my father, is not able to empathize or does not even ask how I am doing. But with my mother, when I come from the psychologist, who uses all kinds of terms of course, EMDR, cognitive behavioural therapy, when I mention that I have to explain everything .. and that costs me at that moment, if you feel really bad, too much time and energy. And then I want to be alone, to unwind.”(Female, 21)*

*“I do not speak my native language [Arabic] at such a level that I can describe deep feelings [to my parents] ... yes I can put such things into words..in Dutch it is possible, but then I have to make it simpler actually. And then it is no more.. then it doesn't feel sincere anymore or something, so then it actually stops.”(Female, 24)*

Another respondent experienced similar experiences:

*“Because Indonesian is their [my parents] native language, it is easy to give advice or say things in Indonesian, but my Indonesian is also very limited. So at some point it is surely a language barrier, and then I throw in some Dutch words, fortunately they understand that, as long as they are not very long sentences (...) Sometimes it is difficult because I can't find the right words [in Indonesian] and if I would say it in Dutch, they can't understand that. Therefore, when I have some problems I do not go to my parents as quickly (...) and instead, I go to my friends with whom I can discuss it more easily.” (Female, 19)*

All respondents speak the native language of their parents, but when a respondent does not speak their parent's native language fluently or their parents do not speak Dutch fluently, the importance of close friend(s) or social connection with others is stressed. This will be further highlighted as a protective factor in the next section.

### ***Protective factors***

#### **1. Having a close friend**

It was evident that a lack of connectedness in the family environment could be compensated by feelings of connection within the peer environment. Multiple respondents experience that talking openly about true feelings in the home environment is not always possible and stressed the importance of having a close friend:

*“Within the Moroccan community, a lot of things are taboo. So suppose I then ... yes, for example ... if I am mentally troubled, I would (...) not discuss it so quickly [at home]. And that's more like home, I don't like showing my emotions but I do show them to my friends.. so that's why I really need them.” (Female, 21)*

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The youngest respondent who is surrounded by highly active classmates and who prefers to be calm himself, does not consider himself as a lonely person, rather he stated:

*“I think I may have had it a few times throughout the school year, but it's not really a thing.” (Male, 15)*

He does have one person in class to whom he feels drawn:

*“Yes I have a ..yes.. there is a friend of mine in my class and with her I can also get along well in the class, we have fixed seats so I am not next to her but yes when we can decide where we can sit, I usually go to her and then I can talk to her.”*

### **2. Recognition in peers**

The supportive role of friendships play an important role in preventing or easing feelings of loneliness. Feeling comfortable around peers with a similar ethnical background was highlighted in many interviews, especially for those who experienced loneliness within the school context.

*“in the 3rd year [of University] I finally came across the Muslim student association. It was like “there are more people like me”, so that was quite a relief. There, I really built up my largest network (...) if something you do is self-explanatory for someone (...) interacting is easier than when that person asks you all the time about every act you do. Then you can't really build a friendship, when everything is questioned.” (Male, 23)*

One respondent explained that when you are insecure about a certain skill, for example your Dutch language skills, it feels good when you do not draw the attention in class:

*“When I came to this class, I expected that the language would be difficult for me, a higher level is hard. I have noticed that the Dutch people who were born here have, so to say, also have difficulties with the language, with the Dutch language. They don't get good grades (...) And here I get a little feeling that.. yes the problem is not just for .. for myself but in general. Then I just feel a little better.”*

Strikingly, this form of recognition was not about feeling different because of not having the same ethnicity as his peers. Having difficulties with the academic language in school is what this respondent shared with his peers which made him feel good to not stand out in his class.

### **3. Satisfactory parental communication**

Where the first two factors are peer-related buffers, this buffer concerns the family context.

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Two respondents who currently do not portray signs of loneliness described the relationship with their parents as equal and even on a friendship level. One respondent who has Moroccan parents said the following:

*“I have a very .. very friendly relationship with my parents, I often do not really see them as my parents .. uh.. I also have very young parents, so that is an advantage. Yes that is also fun .. so many things..I can actually discuss everything with my parents.”*  
(Female, 22)

An equal relationship between the respondent and his or her parents is also recognized in the relationship which one respondent, a Syrian respondent, described:

*“I like it with my parents, look, we are from the Middle East and I always hear people say about people from the Middle East, they are strict with their rules (...) And with my parents (...) they are really easy, they make ..so to say.. friendship with me to help me. To push me forward, get to work, get to work.”* (Male, 20)

Another respondent mentioned her relationship with her family members as very satisfying and lightened up when talking about spending time with her parents and siblings:

*“I discuss everything at home (smiles) the good things but also the bad things, with both of my parents and even with my brother. Yes, at home I feel who I am (smiles).”*  
(Female, 19)

This form of satisfactory parental communication enabled these respondents to not experience a barrier to talk about feelings but it also gave them the impression that their parents really understood their thoughts and feelings, which prevented them from experiencing family-related loneliness.

### **4.1. External support**

When the direct environment - family, friends, peers - cannot offer sufficient support, external support may be complementary for various reasons. One Dutch-born respondent, who describes himself as ‘cosmopolitan’ feels distant from the religion and opinion of his Turkish parents:

*“My mom thinks it's outrageous of me to be friends with a girl. And if I am friends with Dutch youngsters she thinks that is inappropriate. It is possible that [my mom's opinion] played a role in past considering loneliness.”*(Male, 19)

He describes a lack of involvement by his parents, but describes a close, satisfying bond with his Dutch neighbours:

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*“If I could name one thing that I'm really happy with, it's my neighbours, they really mean a lot to me. And I am at my neighbours' home right now [making this Skype call], they also know about my home situation. (...) And yes I noticed differences between my neighbours and my parents, they [the neighbours] also show more interest in my life (...) I have also had help from them with school so uh ... yes my parents actually have nothing to do with my school life.”*

Respondents were asked whether they would consider joining a therapeutic group session such as the one offered by the Join us foundation to meet peers who also experience loneliness. One respondent lightened up when a question was asked about his youth worker who pulled out of his social isolation and advised to participate in a Join us group gathering.

*“he [the youth worker] really helps me with my life. At the moment yes..how can I say it, for 4 years I had just nothing to do, I really have nothing to do. Just eat food, afterwards back to my room, I had absolutely no contact with people and everything. He really helps me to be active, how should I do [this] how should I do [that] solving all the problems so and so .. yes .. I am going to thank him a lot actually, for everything.. with him [thanks to him] really my beautiful life started.” (Male, 22)*

One respondent who visits and volunteers at a youth center, highlighted the benefits of reaching out to a youth worker:

*“(...) you can discuss it [concerns] to them [the youth workers], and uh .. he can also help you, he can contact school for example (...) the youth worker talked to my mentor and he explains.. he is better in explaining how I feel [compared to me] (...) And yes..my mentor can do something with that.” (Male, 15)*

### **4.2. Joining a therapeutic group session**

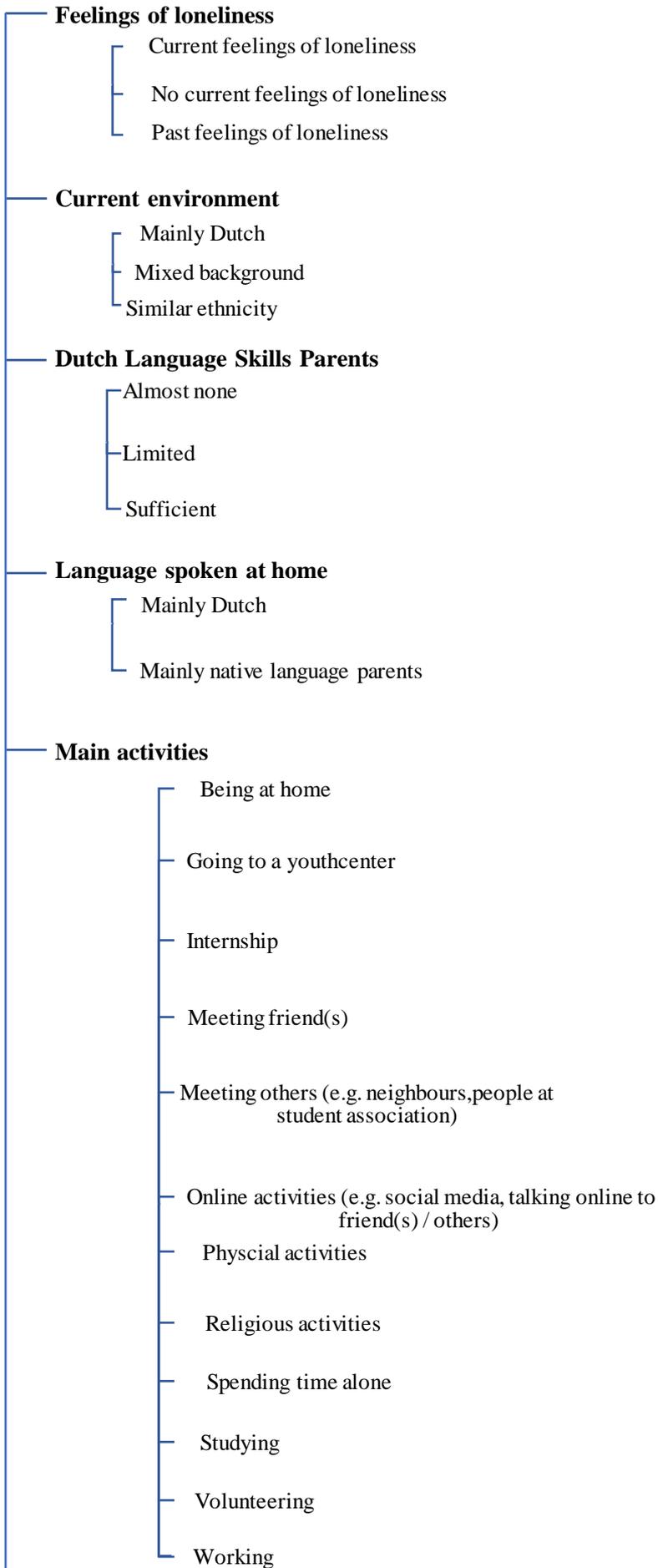
To continue on the case of the respondent that was mentioned above (male, 19 years, Turkish parents). This respondent who did not claim to be lonely did understand why his social worker addressed him to the website of the Join us foundation. He seemed to trust her judgment based on past positive experiences with this particular social worker:

*“I think it was something more .. psycho ... psychological (...) because you [I] finally had someone besides my neighbours to talk to about school problems and uh ... that my school also knew about my home ... home[situation]. So that allows them to be considerate of me. It happened that I did not show up for a few weeks at school (...) I did not have to explain again why I felt it because the social worker already knew [why I was absent].”*

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In contrast to what he thought of himself as not being lonely, he now joins a Join us group to meet lonely peers. In this case, the expertise of a social worker seems crucial in recognizing characteristics of an adolescent who might be experiencing loneliness and therefore preventing increasing signs of loneliness. It is possible that many adolescents do not consider themselves as lonely and will not use words as *being lonely* to describe themselves, which highlights the complexity of the phenomenon of loneliness.

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## Activities when feeling lonely

- Gaming
- Household chores (e.g. cleaning, cooking)
- Music (e.g. listening, playing instrument, singing)
- Physical activities
- Spending time with family member (e.g. dining out, taking a walk)
- Watching TV (e.g. Netflix)

## Protective factors

- Close friend(s)
- Dutch language skills
- Feeling confident
- External support (e.g. social worker, youth worker, psychologist)
- Recognition in others └─┬─┘  
Having a rolemodel
- Religion or spirituality
- Satisfying parental communication
- Social skills

## Talking about feelings

- Not talking about feelings └─┬─┘  
Barrier to talk about loneliness or mental health
- With friend(s)
- With others (e.g. teacher, youth worker, social worker, psychologist)
- With parent(s)
- With sibling(s)

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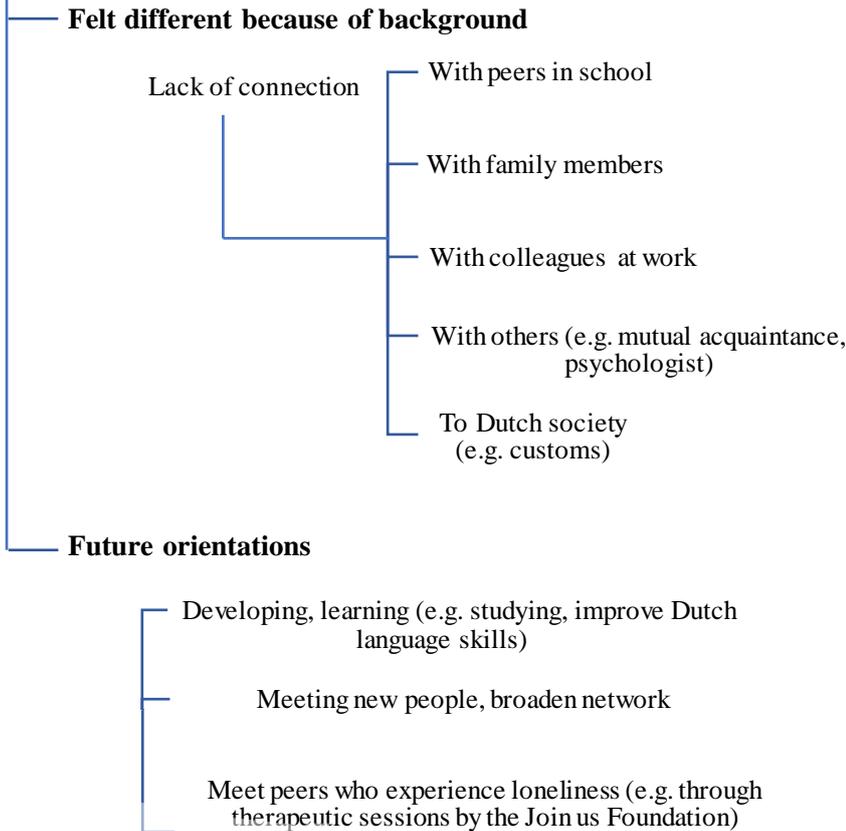


Figure 1. Code tree, main categories and subcategories after coding

## Discussion

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of loneliness among adolescents with a non-Western ethnic background. We tried to answer the following research questions: *To what extent do non-Western adolescents experience their ethnic status as contributing to loneliness?* and *Which protective factors buffer non-Western adolescents against loneliness?*

Firstly, it was found that for those who appear to be an ethnic minority, unsuccessful initial contact (e.g. not sharing common interests) with classmates may result in experiencing a mismatch. Secondly, for immigrant adolescents, the main barrier to engage in social contact is the discrepancy in language proficiency between them and native-speakers. Additionally, low social skills may be more prominent when a minority adolescent experiences a barrier to connect with peers from a different ethnicity. Furthermore, unsatisfactory parental communication is the main factor for family-related loneliness. The first buffer against loneliness concerns having a close friend with whom personal problems can be shared when that is impossible in the family context. On the contrary, when this is possible, having

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satisfying parental communication can work as a buffer. Having recognizable peers in the direct environment (e.g. sharing a similar ethnicity or minority status) increases experiencing a mutual understanding. Lastly, professionals can offer mental support when needed (e.g. recommend therapeutic sessions with peers). A successful mentoring relationship is based on a non-judgmental attitude towards the adolescents' culture and family situation.

The first hypothesis, non-Western ethnic adolescents feeling less connected to their parents, will increasingly need the support of their ethnically similar friend(s), is partly supported by the data. Family-related loneliness among non-Western adolescents relates to lacking satisfactory parental communication, often explained by a parent's lack of Dutch proficiency, causing a disconnection between the adolescent and his/her parent(s). Research by Tseng and Fuligni (2000) showed that adolescents conversing with their parents in different languages felt more emotionally distant and were less likely to engage in discussions. Adolescents that felt less connected in the family environment, who experienced limited opportunities to talk about sensitive topics (e.g. mental health, loneliness), stressed the importance of having a close friend. This underscores earlier research on loneliness mentioning the importance of friendships during adolescence (Martin, Wood, Houghton, Carroll & Hattie, 2014; Qualter et al., 2015). Research shows that feeling a mutual understanding and sharing norms and values with peers might be higher, when you feel you belong to the same ethnic group (Baskin et al., 2010; van Staden and Coetzee, 2010), serving as a potential buffer against loneliness. Sharing an ethnicity matters when an adolescent knows that this friend has similar experiences due to a comparable culture and family context. However, the main buffer against loneliness seemed to be having a close friend, either sharing an ethnicity or not.

The second hypothesis regarded having more same-ethnic classmates lowers experiences of loneliness, which is supported by the data. Our results imply the importance of having someone in whom you recognize yourself, referring to the belongingness perspective by Madsen et al. (2016b), which emphasizes the benefit of familiarity and fitting in with the crowd. Our findings show that non-Western adolescents are likely to feel more comfortable when surrounded by visually similar peers. Being psychologically close to each other due to undergoing similar difficulties, members of the same minority are likely to be a valuable source of information and support for one another (Adelman, 1988). Results show that the ethnic composition of a school class matters in social contact. Although the present study did not include adolescents that belong to the ethnic majority, findings are comparable to what Madsen et al. (2016b) found: ethnic minority adolescents in the school class had increased

odds for loneliness compared to adolescents that belonged to the ethnic majority, and having more same-ethnic classmates lowered the odds for loneliness.

Other results that are not linked to the hypotheses will be mentioned onwards as they are a relevant explanation for the results found in this study. Non-Western adolescents may be prone to both ‘social loneliness’ (the physical absence of a network of social relationships) as well as ‘emotional loneliness’, (the absence of a close, satisfactory attachment) (Weiss, 1973) due to an ethnic minority status resulting in a disconnection from peers. Immigrant adolescents facing stressors, such as difficulties learning a new language, adjusting to a new environment and culture, are often associated with mental health problems (Son, 2013; Rogers-Sirin, Ryce, & Sirin, 2014). Consistent with these findings, being a minority in a Dutch class as a non-native speaker, makes it difficult to connect with others, resulting in feeling drawn to ethnically similar peers.

According to Lodder, Goossens, Scholte, Engels & Verhagen (2016), low social skills may limit opportunities to form and maintain friendships. Our findings show that non-Western adolescents experiencing unsatisfying social contact in real-life, feel more comfortable talking online. If social technologies displace offline with online interactions and/or activities, this is associated with increases in loneliness (Nowland, Necka and Cacioppo, 2018). The current study adds to this that ethnicity seems less relevant in online behaviour. A barrier that is otherwise experienced in real-life interaction, due to a non-similar ethnicity, is less experienced when the person behind an online account is not visible initially.

Respondents who did not report current feelings of loneliness addressed a close relationship with their parents mainly explained by the ability to share personal feelings in a preferred language. According to Tseng and Fuligni (2000), parents and adolescents who draw on the same language may be associated with more frequent discussions regarding youths’ concerns and experiences.

Furthermore, adolescents can discuss mental health issues with professionals who can also function as a role model when having a similar ethnicity, or wearing cultural and/or religious garments. It is desirable that professionals get a good understanding of their home and cultural environment. Study by Spencer (2007) points out that training, helping mentors to identify culture- and class-based values and beliefs, could be critical for successful cross-cultural mentoring relationships. If so, respondents tend to take the professional’s advice seriously and consider therapeutic help, such as one organized by the Join us foundation, to meet peers who also experience loneliness.

### **Limitations, strengths and recommendations**

The generalizability of the results of this study is limited due to a relatively small sample size. The level of education of the respondents ranged from High School level to a PhD level. Due to this educational variety, it was not possible to draw a conclusion regarding a specific educational level, although it is assumable that it may have played a role in the experience of loneliness. Furthermore, this study did not include adolescents of the Dutch majority, therefore experiences in loneliness could not be compared between Dutch and non-Western adolescents.

Research suggests asking respondents directly about loneliness may underestimate the actual level of the respondents' loneliness (de Jong Gierveld et al., 2006). Our qualitative research method may have limited underreporting loneliness and providing knowledge about specific social domains and situations in which adolescents feel lonely. Furthermore, rephrasing the topic of the research during the recruitment phase, (not mentioning directly that the research is about loneliness) resulted in drawing respondents who initially might not decide to participate. This research highlights the importance of sharing an ethnicity or language, which may be useful knowledge for future research in approaching non-Western respondents.

As suggested by Van Bergen, Smit, Van Balkom, Van Ameijden and Saharso (2008), experiences of loneliness may differ among groups varied by ethnicity in the same receiving country. This study highlights the importance of distinguishing between Dutch-born and foreign-born adolescents when studying non-Western ethnic adolescents. Lacking a Dutch proficiency is understandably more prone among immigrant adolescents and more research is needed to indicate whether loneliness is still present if their Dutch proficiency has improved over time.

12 out of 15 interviews were conducted through Skype or WhatsApp video call, allowing to observe facial expressions and reach respondents without geographical limitations. Respondents were often less worried about time being at home or in another comfortable environment.

Although emphasizing that the questions referred to regular daily life experiences prior to the situation around COVID-19 and the interviews were conducted in the early phase of restriction on measures, it may have influenced the way respondents have answered.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Non-Western adolescents seem to be vulnerable for loneliness when feeling disconnected from peers and classmates due to a minority status in the peer context; lacking common interests and ethnicity, experiencing difficulties in communication when lacking social skills or Dutch language proficiency. Feeling disconnected from parents refers to lacking a common language proficiency to share thoughts and feelings with, a close friend may fulfil this need. Those who received external support are most comfortable when professionals (e.g. youth workers and psychologists) are able to view the adolescents' problems without judging ethnic-related customs.

Previous research mentions that being a member of an ethnic minority increases chances of experiencing loneliness, which is confirmed by our findings. The results have implications for practice and policy, suggesting non-Western adolescent are less vulnerable to loneliness when attention is paid to the group composition. Therefore, focus should be on the peer-environment that can be shaped more easily. Successful social interaction cannot be forced when common ethnicity and interests are lacking. Therefore, youth intervention programs should focus on creating a diverse environment, by increasing the size of specific ethnic groups without creating a mono-ethnic environment. This may reduce feelings of loneliness as it removes a barrier to engage in social connections. When applying this in the school context, rather than being a setting for vulnerability, it can be an environment to promote mental health and create opportunities of inter-ethnic interaction. A therapeutic setting can apply this knowledge, when the school environment does not succeed in being sufficiently diverse.

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Appendices

**Appendix A:** Main questions during the interview

1. What does an ordinary week looks like for you?
2. Would you like to tell me something about your home situation/ family (cultural background)?
3. Do you find that you have a satisfying social life?
4. Do you find it easy making friends?
5. Can you talk about your feelings with someone?
6. According to you, is there a difference between being alone (alleen zijn) and being lonely (eenzaam voelen)?
7. How often are you alone or lonely?
8. Do you yourself have an idea why you felt lonely / feel lonely sometimes?
9. According to you, is it sometimes good to feel lonely or is it always a bad thing?
10. What do you do when social contact with others does not go well?
11. Do feel lonely even when you are surrounded by other people?
12. Do you feel like you can talk to your parents about things that are bothering you?
13. What is your ideal situation, what would you like to see differently?
14. Do your friends share the same cultural background as you? How many are from a different ethnic group?
15. Did you ever feel lonely because you felt different because of your cultural background (for example in school)?
16. Did you notice loneliness in other peers? Do you have an idea why they might feel like this?
17. Do you have an idea what would have helped or could have prevented how you felt?
18. Would you like to meet peers who deal with comparable feelings? (referring to the Join us therapeutic group sessions for youth who experience loneliness)

I must note that in the Dutch language the same word is used for “alone” and “lonely” (alleen). Therefore, in order to denote the difference between these two concepts, native speakers of Dutch use the verbs “be” for aloneness (alleen zijn) and “feel” for loneliness (alleen voelen).

**Appendix B:** Questions related to ethnicity

In which country was you father born?

- The Netherlands
- Morocco
- Turkey
- Surinam
- The Netherlands Antilles
- Indonesia
- Syria
- Other, namely: .....

In which country was you mother born?

- The Netherlands
- Morocco
- Turkey
- Surinam
- The Netherlands Antilles
- Indonesia
- Syria
- Other, namely: .....

Which description suits you? (*multiple answers possible*)

I feel:

- Dutch
- Moroccan
- Turkish
- Surinamese
- Antilleans
- Indonesian
- Syrian
- Other, namely: .....

**Appendix C:** Interdisciplinarity of the research topic

In order to show the interdisciplinarity of the research, I will use Bronfenbrenners Ecological Model how different contexts contribute to understanding the topic of ethnicity in relation to loneliness.

**Topic:** Loneliness and ethnicity in youth

**Research questions:**

To what extent do non-Western adolescents experience their ethnic status as contributing to loneliness?

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Which protective factors are experienced by non-Western adolescents as a buffer against loneliness?

### **Level of Microsystem**

Research on loneliness in adolescents has primarily highlighted factors that are related to the characteristics of the individual such as genes, personality traits and several dimensions of social relations as important risk factors (Madsen et al 2016a).

During adolescence, youth define themselves in relation to others and in relation to characteristics determined by their ethnic background (Hamm 2000). Individuals may feel lonely when they experience an absence of mutual empathic understanding: “someone is lonely while being in a foreign culture that leaves one feeling not understood and not able to reciprocate understanding about matters that are culturally meaningful” (van Staden and Coetzee 2010).

### **Level of Mesosystem**

Young immigrants and descendants live in and between cultures of their parents, their family or community on the one hand and the (new) society on the other hand. Some adolescents accept new cultures more easily than their parents, and when these cultural values are practised differently by two generations in a family it may induce intergenerational disagreement (Madsen et al 2016a).

One of the most important and influential contexts for adolescents is their school environment. The increasing numbers of migrant youth around the world lead to growing numbers of heterogeneous school environments in many countries. This makes the school class context an important social environment for understanding loneliness in adolescence. In a study conducted in Denmark, the role of ethnic composition in school classrooms is considered as a key contextual factor that may determine levels of loneliness among adolescents (Madsen et al. 2016b). One of their findings was that students who did not belong to the ethnic majority in the school class and adolescents who did not share self-identified ethnicity with any or only few classmates had increased odds for loneliness.

### **Level of Exosystem**

Studies suggest that adolescents with an ethnic minority background have a higher risk for loneliness than adolescents from the majority population. Primary and secondary school students from minority ethnic groups reported higher levels of loneliness and more racist

experiences relative to the majority group students (Priest, Perry, Ferdinand, Paradies & Kelaher, 2014).

Research on racial discrimination among children and adolescents has predominantly focused on direct experiences of discrimination (where children and adolescents themselves are the targets of discrimination). However, there is growing empirical evidence that vicarious racial discrimination also leads to negative health outcomes for children and adolescents. Vicarious racial discrimination is defined as hearing about or seeing another person's experience of racism. For example, close family members or peers experiencing discrimination that may or may not be witnessed or experienced by children and adolescents themselves (ibid.).

### **Level of Macrosystem**

Loneliness carries a social stigma. The degree to which loneliness is stigmatizing may be different between cultures as cultural background plays an important role in the experience and understanding of loneliness (de Jong Gierveld et al. 2006; Rokach, Orzeck, Cripps, Lackovic-Grgin, & Penezic, 2001). The difference amongst cultures and the way people's social relations are organized within them will result in cross-cultural variations in the way people experience and cope with loneliness (Rokach et al. 2001). A Dutch study of 22-year-olds revealed that Turkish immigrants felt lonelier than adolescents of Moroccan immigrant background and the Dutch majority (an Bergen et al. 2008), suggesting that experiences of loneliness may differ among groups from different cultural backgrounds in the same host country due to different attitudes and ideologies within a culture.

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Appendix D: Contract research project RIT track

Utrecht University - Interdisciplinary Social Science

### Contract research project (RIT)

**Research Project Agreement**

Student: Anita van der Aar

Graduation variant: ...RIT/..Master's in Youth Studies

Supervising lecturer: Tom ter Bogt

Tel: .....

Faculty: Social and Behavioural Sciences

Second assessor: Ina Koning

**Internship information**

Institution: Stichting Jain US

Address: Deken van Miertstr. 8

Postcode and Town/City: 5461 JN Veghel

External supervisor: Linda Nouwen

Starting and ending dates: 30-1-2020 t/m 30-6-2020

**Agreements**

Submission date for work plan/research proposal: first week of february 2020

Period during which the lecturer will review the final product and any interim products:  
june 2020

Number of working days/working hours per week: 2,5 days a week

Topic: Loneliness among ethnic minorities, non-Western adolescents

Agreements concerning papers to be submitted in the interim:  
june 2020

The client (host institution or faculty/programme) will provide the facilities needed in order to conduct the assignment properly.

LONELINESS AMONG NON-WESTERN ADOLESCENTS

If applicable:

Form and frequency of supervision within the host institution:

..... on a weekly basis .....

Number of conferences between the supervising lecturer and the supervisor within the host institution:

..... one or two times .....

Prescriptions concerning the confidentiality of information:

..... collected data is available for student and organization .....

Ownership of the research data, in the event of deviation from the rule (see 16):

..... the same as above .....

Right to publish based on the research data:

..... yes .....

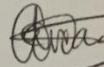
Signed as approved,

Veghel

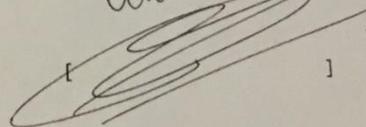
Location/date:

3-02-2020

Signature of the student:

[  ]

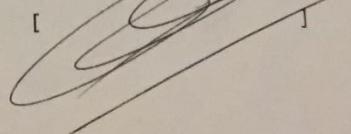
Signature of the supervising lecturer:

[  ]

Signature of the external supervisor (if applicable)

[ (None) ]

Signature of the Course Coordinator

[  ]