

From I. H. Frieze, D. Bar-Tal,
& J. Carroll (Eds.), New approaches
to social problems. San Francisco:
Jossey-Bass, 1979.

Chapter 3

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The Experience of Loneliness



The experience of loneliness has been characterized as "a gnawing . . . chronic distress without redeeming features" (Weiss, 1973). Sullivan (1953) depicted loneliness as "so terrible that it practically baffled clear recall." Descriptions of loneliness by college students we have studied are equally unpleasant. "I felt rejected and inadequate," said one young woman; another wrote, "I felt very depressed, and I hated myself." Loneliness has been linked to other serious problems, including depression (Leiderman, 1969; Ortega, 1969), alcoholism (Bell, 1956), suicide (Jacobs, 1971; Wenz, 1977) and physical illness (Lynch, 1976).

Note: The authors express their appreciation for the thoughtful comments made on earlier versions of this chapter by Martin Bragg, Carolyn Cutrona, Steven L. Gordon, Charles T. Hill, John Michela, Daniel Perlman, Zick Rubin, Bernard Weiner and Scott Wimer.

Loneliness is a distressing problem for Americans of all ages. In one national survey (Bradburn, 1969), 26 percent of Americans reported having felt "very lonely or remote from other people" during the past few weeks. Another national study (Maisel, 1969) found that one in nine Americans had felt severely lonely during the past week. In a recent survey conducted by the UCLA Student Health Service, undergraduates ranked loneliness fifth among common health problems faced by college students, ahead of such problems as drinking, smoking, sexual dysfunction, or unwanted pregnancy.

The existing literature on loneliness (see Peplau, Russell, and Heim, 1978) is rich in theoretical speculations, often based on clinical observations. Psychodynamic theorists (Fromm-Reichman, 1959; Sullivan, 1953) propose that loneliness results when a basic human need for intimacy is not met and suggest that childhood experiences may predispose some individuals to loneliness. Sociological theorists (Riesman, Glazer, and Denney, 1961; Slater, 1970) argue that societal factors, such as social mobility or competitiveness, foster loneliness. Most recently, Weiss (1973, 1974) has taken an interactionist approach, emphasizing the importance of both personal and situational factors. In this view, some people are prone to loneliness because of their personality, social skills, or values; and some situations, such as the death of a spouse or moving to a new city, increase the likelihood of loneliness. Current theories provide important insights about loneliness. Unfortunately, however, they have not led to much systematic empirical research.

In this chapter, we present a cognitive approach to understanding loneliness and describe a program of research based on this framework. While not discounting other factors that contribute to loneliness, we suggest that cognitive processes play an important and neglected part. We begin by defining *loneliness* and describing common antecedents of loneliness. In the next section, we suggest that lonely people are motivated to understand the causes of their loneliness and that they attempt to develop an organized account describing the reasons for their problem. Three basic dimensions (internality, stability, and control) underlying causal explanations

for loneliness are then discussed. Next, predictions are outlined concerning the consequences of causal attributions for the individual's future expectations, emotional reaction to loneliness, self-esteem, and coping behavior; and empirical support for these predictions is then presented. In a concluding section, some implications of our attributional analysis for helping lonely people are considered.

A Definition of Loneliness

A cognitive analysis of loneliness emphasizes people's desires and preferences concerning social relations (for a more detailed discussion, see Peplau and Perlman, 1979). Loneliness occurs when a person's network of social relationships is smaller or less satisfying than the person desires. Thus, loneliness reflects a discrepancy between the person's *desired* and *achieved* levels of social interaction. The desired level of interaction may reflect, in part, human needs for intimacy (Sullivan, 1953; Weiss, 1973, 1974), but it is also influenced by such other factors as past experience and normative expectations.

Loneliness is not synonymous with social isolation. This is an objective aspect of achieved social contact that does not take into account the individual's desires for social relations. When a low level of social interaction is desired—as when a person craves solitude after a busy day at work—isolation may be experienced positively. Social isolation results in loneliness only when the person's desires for social contact remain high. Weiss (1973, p. 228) suggests that, over time, social isolates may adapt, so that their standards for interaction “shrink to conform more closely to the shape of bleak reality.” Support for this possibility is provided by Lowenthal's (1964) finding that old people with a long history of social isolation were less likely to report feeling lonely than were old people with higher levels of social participation.

Based on this definition, loneliness can be precipitated by a change in a person's achieved or desired social relations. At least four major types of events can alter achieved social relations. First, a common cause of loneliness is the ending of a close emotional

relationship through widowhood (Lopata, 1969), divorce (Weiss, 1975), or the breakup of a dating relationship (Hill, Rubin, and Peplau, 1976). Second, physical separation from family and friends may put people at risk for loneliness (Weiss, 1973). Third, status changes, such as retirement or unemployment, may promote loneliness. Finally, changes in qualitative aspects of relationships, such as the degree of conflict, communication, or trust, may cause loneliness.

Changes in desired social relations can also precipitate loneliness. The desire for social contact fluctuates, depending on such factors as the person's mood or the nature of the situation (Schachter, 1959). In addition, social norms dictate the sorts of relationships a person should have, and thus influence desires for social relations. "It is clear to the teenager that he or she should have a date, . . . and it is clear to the average man or woman that he or she should have a mate, family, a circle of friends" (Gordon, 1976, p. 15). When a person's achieved social relations fall short of normative standards, the individual is likely to feel lonely. Finally, personal expectations about the sorts of relationships that are possible or probable in a given situation may temper desires for contact.

We have defined *loneliness* as occurring when there is a discrepancy between a person's desired and achieved social relations. In our view, such discrepancies are typically perceived by the individual as unpleasant and are labeled as loneliness. It is possible that some people suffer from a lack of satisfying social relationships without defining themselves as lonely. In our cognitive analysis of loneliness, however, we focus on those individuals who do define themselves as lonely.

Attributional Accounts of Loneliness

We believe that people are typically motivated to understand the causes of their loneliness. Discovering the reasons for one's loneliness helps to make sense of a distressing situation and is a first step toward reestablishing control over one's social relations. Attributions about the causes of loneliness provide important guides for coping with an aversive experience. The desire to understand

the causes of loneliness should be strongest among those individuals whose loneliness is severe or long lasting. Consistent with this idea is research on divorce by Harvey, Wells, and Alvarez (1978), which suggests that "the more lonely and depressed the individual, the greater the concern with rehashing the issues" (p. 27).

People attempt to construct an organized account of the causes of their loneliness rather than a simple list of reasons. This point is clearly illustrated in Weiss' (1975, p. 15) discussion of accounts for marital separation: "The account is of major psychological importance to the separated, not only because it settles the issue of who was responsible for what, but also because it imposes on the confused marital events . . . a plot structure with a beginning, middle, and end, and so organizes the events into a conceptually manageable unity. Once understood in this way, the events can be dealt with: They can be seen as outcomes of identifiable causes and eventually can be seen as past, over and external to the individual's present self." In analogous fashion, lonely people attempt to develop an organized explanation of their unsatisfactory social life.

We suggest that personal accounts of loneliness include three distinct elements. First, lonely people can usually point to *precipitating events* that led to the onset of their loneliness. Precipitating events often concern changes in the person's social life, such as ending a love relationship or leaving home to attend college. Changes in desired social relations, such as the increased interest in opposite-sex dating that occurs during adolescence, can also precipitate loneliness. Precipitating events create a discrepancy between the person's desired and achieved social relations. Second, in trying to explain why their loneliness persists over time and why they are unable to form satisfying social relationships, people consider *maintaining causes* of loneliness. These typically concern a different set of causal factors, referring to characteristics of the person (being too shy to initiate a relationship) or of the situation (being in a setting where it is hard to meet new people). Maintaining causes are those factors that prevent the person from achieving a satisfactory social life, and they are the focus of our attributional analysis. Finally, lonely people typically have some idea of the sorts of changes in their achieved or desired social relations that would

alleviate their loneliness. These *anticipated solutions* might include such events as finding a congenial group of friends, establishing a new love relationship, or learning to enjoy solitude.

Attributional accounts for loneliness are not necessarily precise. People may be genuinely puzzled or confused about the reasons for their loneliness, or they may consider many possible causal factors. Initial attributions about loneliness may lead people to engage in informal hypothesis-testing behavior (see Wortman and Dintzer, 1978). For example, speculating that loneliness is due to one's appearance might lead a person to try a new hair style or go on a diet. If the person finds that changing his or her appearance makes no difference, then he or she may decide that other causal attributions are more plausible (Kelley, 1971). Partly as a consequence, personal accounts of loneliness may change with the passage of time. An interview we conducted with a sixteen-year-old freshman illustrates such changes. Peter came to UCLA from out of town and knew no one on campus when he started classes. His first months at college were extremely lonely. Initially, Peter attributed his loneliness primarily to the environment. "I thought, it's because of the immense size of the university, as well as the size of classes . . . it is very difficult to form any kind of primary relationship." Over time, however, Peter began to wonder if his explanation was accurate. He noticed that people seemed reluctant to talk to him in classes, and his few attempts at asking women for dates were rebuffed. "I started wondering if there was something about me," he remembered. "I thought maybe because I'm younger than most people here, or because I'm not too good at talking to girls." Accounts may be revised as the person acquires new information and as earlier explanations become less reasonable.

Finally, it is likely that people consider both specific explanations for their loneliness and more general characteristics of their problem. People might consider such specific maintaining causes as being too shy or not trying hard enough to make friends. At the same time, however, people may ask more general questions about the causes of their loneliness, such as "Who is to blame?" or "Can I change my social life?" A central thesis of this chapter is that people's explanations for the causes of their loneliness have important personal consequences. Since attributions are often made

while the experience of loneliness is occurring, they can color people's emotional reactions to loneliness and shape their attempts to cope with loneliness. Causal attributions for loneliness may also affect people's feelings of self-esteem and their expectations for future social success or failure. In the next section, we discuss literature on loneliness indicating the relevance of attributional dimensions of internality, stability, and control.

Dimensions of Causal Attributions for Loneliness

Our analysis of loneliness is based largely on the framework developed by Weiner and his colleagues (see reviews in Weiner, 1974a, 1978) to understand attributions for success and failure in achievement settings. Our research on attributions for loneliness extends Weiner's model to the domain of affiliative behavior and construes loneliness as a form of social failure. In this approach, specific causes of loneliness are less important than general underlying dimensional properties of causes, such as whether the cause concerns a characteristic of the person or of the situation. Although those investigating loneliness have not used the language of causal attribution to describe the experience of loneliness, previous discussions can be reinterpreted within an attributional framework. In particular, discussions of loneliness can be seen as suggesting the importance of causal dimensions of internality, stability, and control.

Internality. A major attributional distinction (locus of causality) concerns whether the cause of loneliness is seen as internal or external to the person. Internal causes would include being unattractive, not knowing how to make friends, or lack of effort; external causes would include being rejected by others, being in situations where it is difficult to make friends, or having bad luck. Research (Weiner, 1974a) has indicated that some internal attributions for failure (especially attributions to factors such as effort, which the individual can influence) may lead to blaming a person for failure. This theme of blame has often been discussed in the literature on loneliness. For example, Lowenthal (1964) identified three distinct groups of semiisolated old people. The *alienated* had never developed close relationships and appeared not to desire

any. The *defeated* had tried and failed to establish relationships and tended to "blame themselves for their poor adjustment" (p. 65). The consequences of self-blame were sometimes striking. Although none of the alienated ever attempted suicide, several of the defeated had done so. A third group, the *blamers*, had also tried and failed to establish social relationships, but they "tended to blame others or circumstances for their suffering" (p. 66). Lowenthal suggested that self-blame leads to greater social withdrawal than does blaming other people. Other discussions of loneliness (Gordon, 1976; Riesman, 1973) speculate that people have a pervasive tendency to blame themselves for loneliness and that self-blame is related to shame and a reluctance to reveal one's problems to others.

Stability. A second important causal dimension concerns whether the cause of loneliness is perceived as stable or unstable. Stable causes include relatively unchanging features of the situation (being in large classes, living in an isolated area) or of the person (personality, social skills). Unstable causes include relatively changeable factors, such as effort or luck. Closely related to the dimension of stability are the person's expectancies for future outcomes. Research (for example, Weiner, Nierenberg, and Goldstein, 1976) has clearly shown that attributing achievement failures to stable causes leads to the expectation of repeated failure in the future. Similarly, loneliness attributed to stable causes should lead to lower expectancies about future social relationships and more generally to pessimism and hopelessness. In fact, a sense of hopelessness (low future expectancy) has frequently been described as characteristic of lonely people. For instance, Gordon (1976, p. 28) writes that "hopelessness is part of the vicious cycle of loneliness." Fromm-Reichmann (1959, p. 7) suggested that severe loneliness is characterized by "paralyzing hopelessness and unutterable futility."

Control. A final dimension concerns whether or not the person perceives himself as having control over factors causing loneliness. Controllable causes are unstable factors a person could intentionally change, such as degree of effort. Uncontrollable causes are factors the person is unable to influence, which might

include internal factors (personality) or external characteristics of the person's social environment. The ability to control one's social relations so as to maintain a satisfactory balance between desired and achieved social relations is central to our conception of loneliness. Loneliness represents a failure to control this balance. As Gordon (1976, p. 41) suggests, "The lonely person does not have a choice. He or she does not choose to be lonely."

But the exercise of personal control is possible in two other ways (Bulman and Wortman, 1977). First, the events that precipitate loneliness may be controlled by the individual. For example, whereas the lonely widow may have had little control over her husband's death, the lonely divorcee may have deliberately separated from her husband. Thus, the divorcee had responsibility for the event that precipitated her loneliness. One study suggests that control over precipitating events may decrease or minimize loneliness. An investigation of break-ups in dating relationships (Hill, Rubin, and Peplau, 1976) found that partners who wanted to end the relationship and perceived themselves as having initiated the break-up reported feeling less lonely and less depressed after the break-up.

Second, and more pertinent to our attributional analysis, is personal control over factors that maintain loneliness. Studies of the elderly suggest that feelings of lack of control over loneliness are quite common (Peplau and Caldwell, in press). For instance, nearly half the lonely old people studied by Tunstall (1967) said there was nothing they could do to alleviate their loneliness. Two experimental field studies provide some support for the idea that increased personal control may reduce loneliness. In a study of institutionalized old people, Schulz (1976) had undergraduates visit residents for a two-month period. Elderly residents who could choose or predict the frequency and duration of visits were significantly more active and rated themselves as higher in hope and happiness and lower in loneliness than residents whose visitor just dropped in, even though actual interaction time was the same. In another experiment conducted in a nursing home for the aged, Langer and Rodin (1976) found that interventions designed to increase personal choice and responsibility improved the social par-

ticipation and general sense of well-being of residents. Thus, a sense of personal efficacy, both over social relations and life events in general, may minimize feelings of loneliness.

Having suggested at least the potential relevance of causal dimensions of internality, stability, and control to the experience of loneliness, we next turn to a consideration of the consequences of causal attributions.

The Consequences of Causal Attributions for Loneliness

In this section, we outline a set of predictions about the consequences of causal attributions for loneliness. A major contribution of an attributional analysis of loneliness is to clarify the impact that loneliness can have on a person's future expectations, emotional reactions, self-esteem, and coping behavior.

Expectancies. Earlier, we indicated that, for some people, loneliness is accompanied by feelings of pessimism and hopelessness about the future. We predict that hopelessness (low expectancy of social success) will be characteristic only of individuals who ascribe their loneliness to stable causes. Individuals who attribute their loneliness to unstable causes should show greater hope that their loneliness will end. The link between stability and expectancy is supported by extensive evidence from studies of achievement behavior (Weiner, Nierenberg, and Goldstein, 1976) and has recently been extended to affiliative behavior. Folkes (cited in Weiner, 1978) studied instances in which a person had been turned down for a date. She found that a person was more optimistic about having a future date with someone who initially rejected them for an unstable reason (for example, "she had to study that evening") than for a stable reason (for example, "she didn't like my personality").

A further prediction can be made concerning the effects of the duration of loneliness on expectancy. A number of studies (reviewed by Weiner, 1974a) indicate that a consistent pattern of achievement outcomes, such as several failures in succession, leads to stable attributions and to future expectations that the same outcome will recur. Thus, continued loneliness over a long period of

time should lead to attributing loneliness to stable causes and to a lower expectancy of the future alleviation of loneliness.

Affect. Loneliness is an unpleasant emotional experience. A study of college students (Russell, Peplau, and Ferguson, 1978) found that high scores on a loneliness scale were significantly correlated with feeling less happy and less satisfied and with more specific feelings, such as *empty*, *self-enclosed*, *awkward*, *bored*, and *restless*. In another study (Berke and Peplau, 1976), college students wrote open-ended descriptions of their feelings and emotions while lonely. Of 196 adjectives given by 136 students, only two could be considered positive (*self-sufficient* and *good*) and a few others as neutral (*quiet*, *objective*). The most common responses were *depressed*, *sad*, *empty*, and *frustrated*. We predict that some affects, such as *unhappy*, *sad*, or *empty*, are usually experienced by lonely people regardless of their causal attributions; these affects occur independently of attributions (Weiner, Russell, and Lerman, 1978). There are, however, three patterns of affective response to loneliness that may be linked to specific causal attributions.

First, there is some evidence linking loneliness to feelings of hostility (Jones, Freeman, and Goswick, 1978; Moore and Sermat, 1974). We predict that feelings of hostility and anger are characteristic only of lonely people who ascribe their loneliness to external factors, such as being excluded by other people. This prediction is consistent with evidence about affects associated with failure on an achievement task, where the ascription of failure to other people's efforts or motives was associated with such feelings as *revengeful*, *aggressive*, *furious*, *bitter*, and *fuming* (Weiner, Russell, and Lerman, 1978).

Second, there is anecdotal evidence that some people feel shame and embarrassment about their loneliness and are reluctant to admit being lonely to others (Gordon, 1976). We predict that feelings of shame, embarrassment, and guilt will be most common when loneliness is attributed to internal causes, and especially to internal causes that are under the individual's control, such as effort. This prediction is consistent with evidence that achievement failure ascribed to low effort is associated with feelings of shame and guilt (Weiner, Russell, and Lerman, 1978).

Finally, several psychologists have postulated a link between loneliness and depression (Ortega, 1969; Leiderman, 1969). Russell, Peplau, and Ferguson (1978) found that college students' scores on a loneliness scale were significantly correlated with self-reports of feeling depressed and with scores on the Beck Depression Inventory. In fact, the necessity of distinguishing loneliness from depression appears to be an important step in establishing the independent importance of loneliness as a psychological variable. The causal relationships linking loneliness and depression are undoubtedly complex. We believe, however, that causal attributions are one factor that determines when loneliness is associated with depression and when it is not.

We predict that loneliness will be associated with depression or depressed affect only when loneliness is attributed to internal, stable causes. This prediction is consistent with results found for failure in the achievement domain indicating that "depression-related labels of *hopeless*, *helpless*, and *depressed* and related affects, such as *resigned* and *aimless*, most appear when there is an internal, stable attribution" (Weiner, Russell, and Lerman, 1978, p. 85). The interrelationship of loneliness, attributions for loneliness, and depression is complex. The pattern we predict could occur in at least two ways. First, for some people, ascribing severe loneliness to internal, stable causes (such as being an unattractive and unlovable person) may lead to depression. In this case, attributions for loneliness are postulated to be a cause of depression. This pattern is most likely to occur when loneliness lasts for a long period of time, since prolonged loneliness should lead to increasingly stable, internal attributions and to lowered expectancies of future social success. Second, it is also possible (as suggested by Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale, 1978; Weiner and Litman-Adizes, in press) that depressed individuals have a general tendency to attribute negative events to internal, stable causes. In this case, depression may influence the type of attributions a person makes for loneliness.

Self-Esteem. Gordon (1976) suggests that loneliness is often accompanied by feelings of worthlessness and failure. Several studies have reported a significant correlation between loneliness and low self-esteem (Eddy, 1961; Jones, Freeman, and Goswick, 1978; Moore and Sermat, 1974). The small size of these correlations

suggests, however, that many lonely people maintain high self-esteem. We predict that loneliness is accompanied by low self-esteem only when the loneliness is attributed to internal causes. This prediction is consistent with evidence showing that, when an achievement failure is attributed to ability or personality, it is associated with feeling incompetent and inadequate (Weiner, Russell, and Lerman, 1978, p. 22).

The relationship between causal attributions and self-esteem is probably reciprocal. An individual's level of self-esteem may influence his or her attributions, as indicated in research by Ickes and Layden (1978). Thus, high-self-esteem people may be more likely to attribute loneliness to external (self-exonerating) factors, whereas low-self-esteem people may be more likely to attribute loneliness to internal (self-blaming) factors. At the same time, causal attributions for loneliness may alter a person's self-esteem, especially if social relationships are important to the individual's self-concept (Snyder, Stephan, and Rosenfield, 1978). Many factors other than self-esteem determine a person's attributions for loneliness. For instance, if loneliness persists over a period of months or years, even high-self-esteem people may come to make more internal attributions. A shift toward more internal self-attributions might in turn lead to a lowering of self-esteem.

Coping Behavior. The literature on loneliness suggests two rather distinct motivational and behavioral responses to loneliness. Some writers suggest that the lonely person is highly motivated, attentive to others, and actively seeks out social relationships. Sullivan (1953) believed that loneliness is a "driving" force that motivates individuals to initiate social interaction despite the anxiety such interactions may produce. Weiss (1973, p. 21) observes that the lonely person's "perceptual and motivational energies are likely to become organized in the service of finding remedies for his or her loneliness." However, some authors suggest that loneliness decreases motivation. According to Fromm-Reichman (1959, p. 3), the most severe loneliness "renders people who suffer it emotionally paralyzed and helpless." The association of loneliness with depression (Bragg, 1978; Russell, Peplau, and Ferguson, 1978) would also suggest that lonely persons, like depressed persons, may experience decreased motivation. A detailed discussion of how

people cope with loneliness is beyond the scope of this chapter, but we can suggest a few ways in which attributions about the causes of loneliness may influence coping. These suggestions are rather tentative, since, with a few exceptions (for example, Bulman and Wortman, 1977), little evidence exists concerning the impact of attributions on coping.

First, we predict that a pattern of motivated, active coping designed to alleviate loneliness will be most characteristic of individuals who make internal, unstable attributions (Weiner, 1974a). Such attributions suggest that loneliness can be overcome through the individual's own efforts and so encourage active coping. We further predict that a pattern of passivity and social withdrawal results when loneliness is attributed to stable causes (either internal or external). Stability should lead to feelings of hopelessness (low expectancy) and a belief that "there is nothing I can do" (low control). Consequently, stable attributions discourage active coping and may instead lead individuals to attempt to distract themselves from feeling lonely or to attempt to alleviate symptoms by using alcohol or drugs or by losing themselves in work or hobbies.

Second, specific attributions undoubtedly play a part in guiding coping behavior. For example, whereas *shyness* and *physical appearance* are both internal attributions, they suggest distinctly different directions for change: attributing loneliness to shyness might lead a person to try harder to be friendly or to enroll in an assertion-training course, whereas attributing loneliness to one's appearance might lead to a program of exercise or the purchase of a new wardrobe. Some internal attributions, such as "my not trying hard enough to meet people," might lead the person to try to change his or her social environment by joining a club or moving to a more sociable place of residence. We assume that people engage in a hypothesis-testing process. Preliminary attributions lead to coping responses. In some instances, the coping is effective in alleviating loneliness. In other instances, the coping does not reduce loneliness, and so the person's causal explanations may be revised. We predict that a repeated pattern of active but unsuccessful coping may lead people to ascribe loneliness to stable, uncontrollable causes, which in turn may lead to a pattern of passive withdrawal.

In the next section, we discuss research designed to test some of these predictions about consequences of causal attributions for loneliness.

Testing a Model of Causal Attributions for Loneliness

Establishing the relevance of causal attributions for the study of loneliness requires at least two kinds of empirical evidence. First, it is important to demonstrate that dimensions of internality, stability, and control are salient when people think about loneliness. An attributional analysis concerns the subjective world of lay persons, and so showing that postulated causal dimensions are part of everyday conceptions of loneliness would be a major first step. Second, it is also important to demonstrate that causal attributions for loneliness have predictable consequences. Research conducted at UCLA has provided clear support for both of these points.

In an initial study (Michela, Peplau, and Weeks, 1979), college women and men were asked to imagine a person who is lonely. To add generality to the study, the hypothetical person's loneliness was described in several different ways (as lasting a short or long time; as resulting from a lack of "friends to do things with" or a lack of "a boy friend or girl friend"). Each participant read only one description, followed by a list of thirteen possible causes of the student's loneliness. This list was based on free-response attributions for loneliness written by college students (Berke and Peplau, 1976). Included were such causes as "shyness," "being in impersonal settings," or being "physically unattractive."

In the first part of the study, students rated how similar each of the thirteen causes of loneliness was to every other cause. In addition, they rated each cause on a series of bipolar scales assessing internality, stability, and control as well as other distinctions (for example, how frequently it was a cause, whether it excused or showed the lonely person was to blame, and whether it was normal or abnormal). A multidimensional scaling analysis was performed on participants' similarity judgments to reveal the salient underlying dimensions of perceived similarity among causes. Two dimensions emerged, which, as predicted, reflected internality and stabil-

ity. The labeling of these two dimensions was verified empirically by their correspondence with separate ratings of causes on bipolar scales of internality and stability. Control did not emerge as a third, orthogonal dimension. The data suggested, however, that the controllability of causes was related to both internality and stability—causes were seen as controllable if they were both internal and unstable (for example, effort).

The results of the multidimensional scaling analyses are important for several reasons. First, they provide an empirical basis for applying existing attributional models to the study of loneliness. Second, results support Weiner's (1978) recent contention that his attributional model, originally developed in the context of achievement, is a more general model of motivation that is applicable to a variety of contexts, including affiliative behavior. This finding is all the more striking, since the methods used in the present study differed markedly from those used in previous attributional research. The dimensional model of stability and internality was originally developed by a *deductive* process of reasoning from characteristics of specific causes to postulating general dimensions and then empirically testing predictions dictated by the model (Weiner, 1974a). In contrast, the study of Michela, Peplau, and Weeks (1979) used an empirical process from the outset, namely, multidimensional scaling, to derive perceived dimensions *inductively*. Third, the results bear on current discussions of whether controllability represents a separate third dimension of causality or is subsumed under dimensions of internality and stability. The present results support the view that controllability is not an independent dimension.

Finally, the results of this study help to clarify how students perceive common causes of loneliness. In several instances, students' perceptions did not correspond to our judgments before the fact. For instance, whereas we might have considered a lack of opportunities to meet people as a stable cause (comparable to Weiner's task difficulty), students viewed it as unstable. Students in our sample seem to believe that new opportunities can be found or will eventually occur over time. The causes that corresponded most closely to task difficulty (that is, those that were external and stable) referred to other people in the lonely person's social environment

(for example, "other people have their own groups"). Similarly, students viewed shyness as similar to effort—an internal, unstable, and controllable cause rather than a stable personality trait.

A second set of findings from the Michela, Peplau, and Weeks study bears on the consequences of causal attributions. Participants rated the lonely person on a series of scales, including depression and optimism-pessimism. Predictions were made about the relationship of causal attributions to these consequences, and the predictions were tested using path analysis. Clear evidence was found that the affective reaction of *depression* was significantly related to the dimension of internality; the person was seen as more depressed if his or her loneliness was ascribed to internal causes. Evidence was also found linking *expectancy* about future outcomes (optimism-pessimism) to the dimension of stability; the person was seen as more pessimistic when his or her loneliness was ascribed to stable causes. Finally, the path analysis supported the earlier multidimensional scaling finding that controllability is not an independent dimension. In the path analysis, controllability was significantly related to stability but not to internality. Controllable causes were unstable.

In summary, results of the study by Michela, Peplau, and Weeks provide strong support for the relevance of an attributional framework to the study of loneliness. It was shown that participants have a conceptual structure for loneliness in which attributional dimensions proposed by theory are salient. Furthermore, these dimensions were found to have predictable consequences on participants' judgments about a lonely person. These results are, however, based on perceptions of loneliness in another person. They do not provide direct information about self-attributions and their consequences.

Self-Attributions for Loneliness

Empirical evidence concerning the nature and consequences of self-attributions for loneliness comes primarily from a longitudinal study of UCLA undergraduates. In this New Student Study, a sample of over 300 men and women were studied during their first year in college. Students were initially tested in both their second

and seventh weeks at UCLA in fall, 1977 (reported in Bragg, 1978), and again during spring, 1978. There is good reason to believe that college students are a high-risk population for loneliness. A large study of individuals from all age groups (cited in Dyer, 1974) found that loneliness was more frequently reported by high school seniors and college freshmen than by any other age group, including the elderly. According to a survey by the UCLA Student Health Service, over 70 percent of undergraduates viewed loneliness as an important problem.

In the New Student sample, 42 percent of students reported feeling moderately or extremely lonely during their second week at school. This pattern is readily understandable, since, for most students, the transition to college brings about major changes in relations with family and childhood friends and requires the establishment of a new social life in an unfamiliar setting. However, even though college students are an appropriate population for studies of loneliness, it is not known if the loneliness experienced by these young adults is qualitatively comparable to the loneliness of such other groups as the divorced or the elderly.

We first sought to identify factors that students perceive as causing their own loneliness. Students' open-ended descriptions of the reasons for their own loneliness (Berke and Peplau, 1976) provided a lengthy list of causal attributions. From these, a shorter list of thirteen causes was created, which included the most commonly cited reasons as well as less frequently mentioned reasons, such as luck, that were of theoretical interest. Those participants in the New Student Study who reported feeling at least moderately lonely ($N = 140$) rated the importance of each of these thirteen causes for their own loneliness on a five-point scale (see Table 1). As has been found in achievement settings, effort was rated as the single most important cause. Other high-importance causes included both internal factors (fear of rejection, not knowing how to make friends) and external explanations (impersonal situations, few opportunities). Among the least important causes were luck, physical appearance, and personality.

Causal Attributions and Depressed Affects. Our research has examined the relationship between attributions for loneliness and depressed affects. Clear empirical support has been found for the

Table 1. Mean Importance Rating of Thirteen Causes of Loneliness

Cause	Mean Importance
My not trying hard enough to meet someone.	2.05
Not enough opportunities to meet people.	1.78
My being too shy.	1.76
My always being in impersonal situations with too many people.	1.74
My not knowing what to do to start a relationship.	1.62
Other people have their own groups and aren't interested in meeting me.	1.62
Other people don't try to make friends.	1.57
My fear of rejection.	1.41
My personality.	1.31
Other people are afraid to make friends.	1.19
My lack of luck in meeting people.	0.99
My physical appearance.	0.96
My belief that there's little chance of finding someone.	0.89

Note: Ratings were made on a 5-point scale (0 to 4) and are based on responses of 140 students who reported being at least moderately lonely during the second week of fall quarter.

prediction that loneliness is most often accompanied by depressed affects when self-attributions for loneliness are internal and stable. In the Berke and Peplau study (1976), students wrote open-ended descriptions of the "feelings and emotions" they experienced when they were lonely. Although *depressed* was the single most frequently mentioned affect (18 percent overall), it was cited twice as often by students giving an ability attribution for their loneliness as by students giving an effort attribution. Of particular interest was the unique occurrence of helplessness/hopelessness in the ability attribution group. Only when the cause of loneliness was perceived as both internal and stable did students report feeling *helpless*, *hopeless*, *despair*, *shut out*, *inactive*, *slow*, or *apathy*. Students who perceived the cause of their loneliness as changeable or external did not report such feelings.

Participants in the New Student Study completed the Beck Depression Inventory (1967b), a clinical measure of depression. Evidence was found (see Bragg, 1978) linking depression to internal, stable attributions for loneliness. Analyses comparing moderately lonely students who scored extremely low on the Beck scale (mean = 2.0) with lonely students who scored extremely high on depression (mean = 18.1) found that depressed students were significantly more likely to rate the causes of their loneliness as internal ($t(51) = 1.9, p < 0.03$) and as stable ($t(51) = 1.9, p < 0.03$). No differences were found between the depressed and nondepressed groups on perceived controllability of the causes of loneliness. Further analyses compared the depression scores of students whose attributions for their own loneliness were above versus below the median on internality and on stability. A 2 X 2 analysis of variance indicated a significant interaction between these two attributional dimensions ($F(1, 43) = 3.7, p < 0.03$). Depression scores were highest for students whose attributions for loneliness were both internal and stable.

Three internal causes of loneliness were particularly important for depression in our college sample. Students scoring high on the Beck Depression Inventory were significantly more likely than low scorers to cite as important reasons for their loneliness their physical appearance, personality, and fear of rejection. Further, for all lonely students (regardless of Beck scores), giving importance to any of these three causes was correlated with reports of feeling depressed, hopeless, and helpless.

Taken together, these results support the idea that the relationship between loneliness and depression is mediated by causal attributions for loneliness. The data also support Weiner and Litman-Adizes (in press) and others, who propose that depression is generally associated with stable, internal attributions. This pattern of results might occur because depressed persons have a generalized tendency or "attributional style" to attribute negative outcomes to internal, stable causes. But another possibility deserves consideration. In this study, unlike most research on attributions and depression, individuals made attributions for an important negative life event (loneliness) rather than for their performance on some arbitrary experimental task (see, for example, Rizley,

1978). It is therefore possible that, for some individuals, the experience of severe or enduring loneliness, coupled with internal, stable attributions for their loneliness, is actually a cause of depression.

Causal Attributions and Coping Behavior. We suggested earlier that causal attributions both motivate and direct coping behavior. We predicted that a pattern of active problem-solving behavior would be most characteristic of individuals who make internal, unstable attributions for their loneliness. Partial support for this prediction is provided by data from the New Student Study concerning the social activities that lonely students had recently engaged in. A significant relationship was found between perceiving the causes of loneliness as unstable and reporting both "going somewhere or doing something to meet new people" and "going to a party." Contrary to prediction, however, no relationship was found between these active coping behaviors and internality.

Preliminary evidence that attributions for loneliness guide or direct coping behavior comes from the Berke and Peplau (1976) study. In this study, it was found that students who attributed loneliness primarily to their own low effort were most likely to cite as a main coping strategy "try harder to be friendly," whereas students who attributed loneliness primarily to being in a situation where it was difficult to make friends were most likely to cite "look for activities where I could meet new people." Both these coping strategies are active and involve personal effort, but the effort is directed quite differently in the two cases. Further research on the impact of attributions for loneliness and for other aversive life experiences on coping behavior is clearly needed.

Duration of Loneliness and Causal Attributions. We have proposed that causal attributions for loneliness are often revised as loneliness continues over time. Two processes affecting such changes concern the general *plausibility* of particular attributions for short-term versus long-term loneliness and the results of informal *hypothesis-testing* of preliminary attributions. In general, we predict that, when loneliness persists over time, there is a tendency for attributions to become more internal and more stable. In turn, these changes may lead to lower expectancies for the future and, ultimately, to depression.

Evidence that the plausibility of attributions differs depend-

ing on the duration of loneliness comes from a study of ninety-eight UCLA undergraduates (Peplau, Russell, and Heim, 1977). After reading descriptions of a college student who had been lonely for "a short period of time" or for "six months," participants made causal attributions for the person's loneliness. Duration of loneliness had a striking effect on the internality of attributions ($\chi^2 (1) = 60.2, p < 0.001$). Only 22 percent of attributions for short-term loneliness were internal, as compared with 85 percent of attributions for long-term loneliness. Duration had no effect, however, on the stability of attributions; in both conditions, about 80 percent of attributions were unstable. It appears that such explanations as being in large classes or having few opportunities to meet people are plausible for short-term loneliness but are less reasonable for enduring loneliness. Over time, the possibility that internal factors, such as shyness, lack of effort, or poor social skills, may contribute to loneliness becomes more plausible. Although we do not have direct evidence on this point, we suspect that similar plausibility considerations affect self-attributions for loneliness.

The New Student Study provides some evidence for shifts toward more internal self-attributions as loneliness persists over time. Among students who remained moderately lonely from their second to seventh week at UCLA, significant decreases occurred in the rated importance of such external causes as "other people don't try to make friends" or "others have their own groups." Further, a significant relationship was found between the length of the student's current loneliness and the importance given to particular attributions; students who had been lonely for longer periods of time were more likely to attribute their loneliness to their physical appearance and personality.

Reactions to Lonely Others

Although people sometimes react toward lonely individuals with warmth and compassion, this is not invariably the case. The opposite tendency, for people to reject and avoid the lonely, has frequently been noted. For example, Fromm-Reichman (1959, p. 6) observed that "the lonely person may be displeasing if not frightening to his hearers, who may erect a psychological wall of ostracism

and isolation about him as a means of protecting themselves." Both Fromm-Reichman (1959) and Burnside (1971) suggest that this pattern of avoiding the lonely may characterize health professionals as well as lay persons.

Although the factors that lead people to react negatively to the lonely are complex (see Peplau and Perlman, 1979), we believe that attributions play a part. Weiss (1973) has commented that "Our image of the lonely often casts them as justifiably rejected" (p. 12). "It is easy to see the lonely as out of step, as unwilling to make necessary overtures to others, as lacking in qualities necessary to satisfactory human relations. In this way, we blame as we purport to explain" (p. 75).

The attributions observers make for the causes of another person's loneliness may contribute to a pattern of avoidance and rejection. Undergraduates' open-ended descriptions of why "college students at UCLA" are lonely (Berke and Peplau, 1976) frequently included attributions to the person that had an element of blame. For instance, one student wrote, "The fault, I believe, always lies within the individual who is lonely. If a person is lonely, it is because that person has not taken the initiative in attempting to meet people." Our attributional analysis suggests that sympathy for the lonely should be greatest when they are perceived as lonely through no fault of their own (external or uncontrollable causes). In contrast, rejection and avoidance should be greatest when the lonely individual is perceived as personally responsible for his or her loneliness (attributions are internal and controllable).

Empirical support for these predictions comes from two studies conducted at UCLA. In one study (Wimer and Peplau, 1978), college students read a brief description of a fictional college student who had gone to a university counseling center because he had been feeling lonely. Liking for the lonely person was significantly related to perceiving the causes of loneliness as situational rather than personal (internal), and liking was least when the person's loneliness was attributed to his personality. Results also indicated the importance of the individual's perceived effort to overcome his loneliness. High effort was significantly correlated with greater liking and sympathy for the lonely person and with rating the lonely person as being more friendly and more interest-

ing to talk to. These data are consistent with findings (see Weiner, 1974a) that effort is a major determinant of rewards and punishments for achievement behavior.

A second study (Berke and Peplau, 1976) included questions about more general attitudes toward the lonely. Included in a longer questionnaire were items about the extent to which lonely people are responsible for their loneliness: "People can be lonely through no fault of their own" and "People who are lonely bring it on themselves." Other items assessed reactions toward the lonely, such as "I have little sympathy for a person who is lonely" or "I prefer not to associate with a person who is lonely." As predicted, believing that lonely people are responsible for their problem was significantly correlated with having little sympathy for the lonely and with avoiding the lonely.

Taken together, these results suggest that attributions can influence reactions to lonely others. Certain explanations for loneliness may lead us to blame the lonely person and hence to derogate and reject him or her. The possibility that this tendency may affect the reactions of clinicians and helping professionals is particularly worthy of investigation.

Implications for Helping the Lonely

Lonely people seek to understand their problem in order to alleviate it. Causal attributions for loneliness serve primarily to help individuals control and change their unsatisfactory social life. But, as Kelley (1971, p. 22) has observed, "control of one's environment undoubtedly involves some sort of balance between controlling the *controllable* and controlling the *important*." We believe that it is essential for lonely people to maintain a sense of personal control over their social environment. But, if attempts to alleviate loneliness are misdirected at unimportant or inaccurate causes, they are unlikely to succeed and so may ultimately lead to feelings of lowered control. Thus, a major goal of counseling or of self-help for the lonely should be to identify accurately the important causes of an individual's loneliness and to assess correctly the potential changeability of these causes. To this end, special care should be taken to avoid two common errors affecting causal attributions for loneliness.

Underestimating Situational Causes. There is a tendency to underestimate the importance of situational causes of loneliness and to overestimate the role of personal factors—to commit what Ross (1977, p. 183) has called "the fundamental attributional error." This tendency is especially clear in cases where loneliness is severe or enduring. It is encouraged by the emphasis in both folk wisdom and psychological thinking on a characterological theory of loneliness (Weiss, 1973). It is fostered by an image of the lonely as willful social deviants who fail to live up to normative expectations concerning appropriate social relationships. The tendency to see the lonely as unusual is also affected by a general reluctance among people to reveal feelings of loneliness to others. A situation of pluralistic ignorance about loneliness may commonly exist, in which people assume that their own loneliness is unique or abnormal. Our own view is that loneliness is most often caused by an *interaction* of personal and situational factors. Loneliness typically results from a poor match between the individual's interests, social skills, or personal characteristics and his or her social environment. Thus, careful consideration should be given to both internal and external causes.

Underestimating the Changeability of Causes. Several factors may lead people to underestimate the potential changeability of causes of loneliness. First, lonely people often focus their attention on the precipitating causes of loneliness rather than on the maintaining causes. Precipitating events, such as the death of a spouse or a recent divorce, are stable and irrevocable. In contrast, factors that perpetuate loneliness and impede the development of a satisfactory social life, such as shyness or limited opportunities to meet people, may be more amenable to change. Encouraging the lonely to examine the maintaining causes of loneliness may thus lead to perceptions of greater changeability.

Second, people may inaccurately assess the stability of specific causal factors. For example, students in our research identified physical appearance and personality as stable causes of loneliness. Although it may be more difficult to change these factors than to change one's degree of effort, they are by no means intractable. People can learn new social skills, can improve their appearance, can learn to be more assertive in social settings, and so on. It

may be helpful to emphasize that judgments of stability concern the relative changeability of causal factors rather than an absolute stable-versus-unstable dichotomy.

Finally, the common assumption that it is easier to change the person than to change the situation needs to be reexamined. People can often influence and change their social environment by selecting from among alternative social settings, finding other people with similar interests, and influencing their position within various social institutions. For example, the new college student can select a small school or a large university, can join clubs or teams, move on campus, go to social events and dances, sign up for small seminars rather than large lecture classes, and in many ways control the nature of his or her social interactions. In some instances, the new student can even create new social groups, perhaps by starting an ecology club or a consumer-interest group. The notion that people must adjust to a fixed or invariant social environment is false. In fact, it may be easier for individuals to alter their social surroundings than to change long-standing attitudes, interests, social skills, or personality characteristics.

Increasing Personal Control. Several researchers (Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale, 1978; Dweck and Goetz, 1978) have suggested that a key factor in enhancing perceived control is to attribute failure to low effort. In the case of loneliness, we believe that the crucial issue is not the degree of effort a person exerts but rather where the person's effort is directed. In laboratory studies of attributions and behavior, the nature of the effort required is typically implicit in the task. In an achievement context, for example, effort might mean concentrating more attentively, working faster, or checking one's answers more carefully. In the case of loneliness, in contrast, it is not necessarily clear whether the person's effort should be directed at being more friendly, at improving social skills, at finding new ways to meet people, or at any one of many other possibilities. The key to helping lonely people to develop satisfying social relationships may be to direct the person's effort toward remedying important and potentially changeable causes of loneliness.