Essence, Volume 2, No. 4, 1978, 207-220

LONELINESS: A COGNITIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

A cognitive analysis of loneliness is presented. Loneliness is defined as occuring when a person's achieved social relations are less numerous or less satisfying than the person desires. Factors that cause loneliness by altering the person's achieved or desired social relations are discussed. Attention is given to the process by which a person labels himself/herself as lonely and to perceptions of personal control over relationships. People's attributions about the causes of their own loneliness are examined and related to such consequences as emotional reactions and coping. Throughout, consideration is given to loneliness among old people.

Several different theoretical approaches to loneliness can be identified. Existential theorists (e.g. Moustakas, 1961; Von Witzleben, 1958) view loneliness as inherent in the human condition. Moustakas, for example, distinguishes "true loneliness" (an awareness of the individual's inescapable separation from others) from "loneliness anxiety" (a fear of being alone). Sociological theorists (e.g. Bowman, 1955; Fromm, 1955; Reisman, Glazer & Denney, 1961; Slater, 1970; Tournier, 1962) believe that loneliness is caused by cultural and societal factors. For instance, Slater perceives a basic conflict between cultural values of competition, independence and uninvolvement, and human desires for community and engagement. Psychodynamic theorists (e.g. Burton, 1961; Ferreira, 1962; Fromm-Reichman, 1959; Sullivan, 1953; Zilboorg, 1938) assume that loneliness results when a basic human need for intimacy is not met. Sullivan presented the clearest statement of this position, defining loneliness as the "exceedingly unpleasant and driving experience connected with the inadequate discharge of the need for human intimacy" (1953, p. 290). Finally, an interactionist approach (e.g. Weiss, 1973, 1974) emphasizes the importance of both personal and situational factors. Some people are prone to loneliness because of their personality or values; some situations such as death of a spouse or moving to a new city increase the likelihood of loneliness.

Each of these approaches provides a useful perspective on loneliness. Unfortunately, current theories have seldom been tested empirically and have not been very successful in stimulating theory-based research. Studies of loneliness have tended to rely heavily on clinical observations, and are generally non-cumulative. In this paper, we present a cognitive

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We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Martin Bragg, Margaret Heim, John Michela, Daniel Perlman, Dan Russell and Scott Wimer to this article.

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approach to the study of loneliness. While not discounting other factors that contribute to loneliness, we believe that cognitive processes play an important and neglected part in the experience of loneliness. It appears that a cognitive analysis is useful in interpreting existing findings about loneliness and in identifying new directions for future research.

Defining Loneliness

A cognitive analysis emphasizes people's desires and preferences concerning social relations, rather than assumed human needs for contact. Loneliness exists to the extent that a person's network of social relationships is smaller or less satisfying than the person desires (see Peplau & Perlman, Note 1). In this definition, as in Sermat's (Note 2), loneliness reflects the relationship between the person's *desired* level of social interaction and the level of contact the person has *achieved*. A somewhat similar position has been taken by Altman (1974) in a discussion of privacy. He postulated that each person has an optimal level of social contact. When faced with excessive contact, a person experiences "Crowding" or an "invasion or privacy". In contrast, when social relations are suboptimal, loneliness results.

Central to our definition is the idea that loneliness is distinct from social isolation, aloneness or solitude. Measures of social isolation such as frequency of daily social interactions assess only the individual's achieved level of social relations. They do not take into account the individual's desired level of social contact. While we assume that people have recurring desires for at least minimal social interaction, low levels of social contact can be experienced as positive when they are desired. For many people, time spent alone while reading, hiking or working on an intellectual project may be highly pleasant. "It is possible to be alone without being . . . lonely, when retreat, seclusion or protected isolation are recognized and chosen as desirable or essential for accomplishing specific purposes" (Peplau, 1955, p. 1476).

Support for this definition of loneliness comes from research demonstrating that social isolation is not invariably associated with loneliness. In a study of elderly Britons, Townsend (1973) found that 60% of the most isolated old people were not lonely. Lowenthal (1964) reported that old people with a long history of social isolation, who had been "loners" for some time, were less likely to express feelings of loneliness than old people with higher levels of social participation. It seems likely that socially isolated people reduce their desires for social relations. Weiss (1973) has noted that over time, social isolates may adapt, that their standards for interaction may "shrink to conform more closely to the shape of bleak reality" (p. 228). In short, social isolation results in loneliness only when the person's desires for social relations remain high.

Changes in Achieved and Desired Social Relations

According to our definition, loneliness can be precipitated either by a change in the person's achieved social relations or by a change in the person's desired social relations. Achieved relations can be altered by at least four major types of events. First, the ending of a close emotional relationship is a common cause of loneliness. Widowhood (e.g. Lopata,

1969), divorce (e.g. Weiss, 1976), and the breakup of dating relationships (e.g. Hill, Rubin & Peplau, 1976) put people at risk for loneliness. Second, physical separation from family and friends is associated with loneliness (e.g. Weiss, 1973). Third, status changes such as retirement, unemployment or the departure of one's grown children from home may promote loneliness (Gordon, 1976). Fourth, reduced satisfaction in the qualitative aspects of one or more relationship may also generate loneliness.

Changes in desired levels of social relations can precipitate loneliness if they are not accompanied by corresponding changes in achieved social relations. At least four major factors affecting levels of desired contact can be identified. First, the desire for social contact fluctuates depending on the task, the physical setting, one's mood and so on. For instance, Schachter (1959) demonstrated that situations of stress or uncertainty can increase the desire to be with others. Second, personal expectations about the sorts of relationships that are feasible or likely in a given situation temper desires for contact. The person who has experienced low levels of contact in the past may have relatively low expectations for the future, and may also be satisfied with lesser levels of contact.

Third, social norms dictate the sorts of relationships a person should have, and thus influence desires for social relations. According to Gordon (1976), "It is clear to the teenager that he or she should have a date after school, and it is clear to the average man or woman that he or she should have a mate, family, a circle of friends" (p. 15). When a person's achieved social relations do not correspond to normative standards, the individual is likely to feel lonely.

Finally, social comparison processes affect the desired level of social relations. In assessing one's own relationships, people often compare themselves to others in similar situations (Pettigrew, 1967). Knowing that others are faring worse or have lower aspirations for social relations may lead a person to minimize his or her own loneliness. In contrast, believing that others are socially more successful may heighten feelings of loneliness. As one young homemaker revealed to journalist Suzanne Gordon:

> When I have felt the loneliest, I have found it the most difficult to tell my husband. He would come home from work with all sorts of stories about his day, and I would hate him for it. It made me feel such a failure. (1976, p. 107)

Thus social comparison processes may affect a person's desires for relationships and the person's perception of the size or importance of the social deficit.

The Self-Labeling Process

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 and labeled as loneliness. Several factors affect this labeling process.

First, everyday language suggests a wide variety of labels for psychic distress: loneliness, anxiety, moodiness, depression, etc. It is not always easy for a person to label his or her subjective experience accurately (e.g. Schachter & Singer, 1962; Nisbett & Valins, 1971). Cultural beliefs about the nature of loneliness and about when loneliness usually

occurs act as guides in the self-labeling process. For instance it is considered reasonable for a child to be homesick and lonely on a first trip to camp; it is appropriate to be lonely when one moves to a new city. To some extent, people may match their own experience to cultural definitions of loneliness.

Second, people may seek to identify the cause of their distress, and use these perceived causes as guides to labeling their state. If a person identifies the cause of his or her problem as the absence or inadequacy of social relationships, then loneliness is a sensible label. Of more interest are cases where loneliness is not associated with a relationship problem. For instance, one student we interviewed reported that he felt lonely after flunking a major test. In this case, contact with sympathetic friends was a way to restore the person's lowered self-esteem. The absence of friends was salient because they provided a remedy for the student's distress, not because they caused it.

Finally, several factors may make people reluctant to define themselves as lonely. Loneliness has important implications for one's self-image and self-presentation to others. The lonely are often stigmatized. Weiss (1973) suggests that we tend to see lonely people as deserving to be rejected; they are stereotyped as "unattractive, shy, intentionally reclusive, undignified in their complaints, self-absorbed, and self-pitying" (p. 12). As a result, people may prefer not to admit loneliness to themselves or to others. According to Gordon (1976), "We try to conceal our low opinion of ourselves, keeping our real, tarnished selves in reserve, . . . and proffering an image of a false, more confident self" (p. 37). This process may operate at a conscious level, when a person deliberately conceals feelings of loneliness from others. Or it may operate at a non-conscious level, in which a person's experience of loneliness is so painful that he or she must defend against it (Sullivan, 1953; Peplau, 1955). The defenses of such people might include behaviours like alcoholism that serve as indirect ways to obtain attention and care from others.

Perceived Control

In our view, people attempt to maintain a balance between desired and achieved social relations. Altman (1974) has defined privacy as an "interpersonal boundary control process, designed to pace and regulate interactions with others" (p. 3). Loneliness is one type of failure of this control process, in which achieved social relations are less than those desired. A central issue in loneliness is the individual's perception of exercising personal control (Johnson, 1974) over social relations to achieve a desired level of contact.

There is some evidence that feelings of personal control may reduce stress (Averill, 1973), and enhance the enjoyment of decision-making (Harvey & Jellison, 1974) and other daily activities (Brock & Becker, 1967). Lefcourt (1973) concluded that "the sense of control, the illusion that one can exercise personal choice, has a definite and positive role in sustaining life" (p. 424).

The clearest evidence linking perceived control to loneliness comes from two experimental field studies. In one study, conducted in a nursing home for the aged, Langer & Rodin (1976) found that increased choice and personal responsibility, even in small matters such as the selection of a plant to care for, improved the social participation and general sense of well-being of residents. In another 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.

Additional evidence bearing on this theme comes from a study of the breakup of college students' dating relationships (Hill, Rubin & Peplau, 1976). Partners who wanted the relationship to end and perceived themselves as having initiated the breakup reported feeling less lonely, less depressed and happier after the breakup.

The concept of perceived control may be useful in understanding many findings about loneliness. For example, it has frequently been reported that for the elderly, "contact with family members, especially children, does little to elevate morale, while friendship-neighbouring is clearly related to less loneliness and worry" (Arling, 1976, p. 757). This finding has been explained in terms of the older person's dependency on his or her children, and the differing interests of parents and children. Our analysis suggests that elderly persons may experience greater personal control in relations with peers than in relations with family. Because grown children have more constrained work schedules and greater family obligations, they tend to determine the timing of visits with elderly parents. Further, since elderly parents may lack mobility due to poor health or lack of transportation, children may also control how a visit takes place. In contrast, visits with neighbours and friends tend to be scheduled at mutual convenience. Friendships are characterized by greater reciprocity (Arling, 1976) and shared control.

Causal Attributions for Loneliness

The search to understand the causes of loneliness is not limited to researchers and mental health practitioners. Lonely people are also motivated to explain the reasons for their loneliness. For both groups, understanding the causes of loneliness is a first step toward predicting, controlling, and ultimately alleviating loneliness. In our cognitive analysis, people's attributions for the causes of loneliness play a central role. Causal attributions are believed to affect the lonely person's emotions, behaviour and expectations for the future. Similarly, attributions have impact on how people react to loneliness in others.

Loneliness as Social Failure

In many ways, loneliness represents a major social failure. In Western culture, success is measured not only by income and occupational prestige, but also by the kinds of relationships a person has. Gordon (1976) comments that, "Relationships are important not only for the pleasure they bring the individual, but as a mark of his or her status as a functioning and valuable member of society" (p. 33). Loneliness implies a failure to achieve one's own standards for social relations, and often a failure to conform to social norms as well. By viewing loneliness within an achievement framework, existing attributional analyses of success and failure become relevant.

The work of Weiner (1974) is most pertinent to our analysis of loneliness. Weiner and his colleagues have done extensive research on causal attributions for success and failure, mostly in the area of intellectual performance. Weiner has identified four primary causes (ability, effort, task difficulty and luck) plus several less common ones (e.g. mood, fatigue, or

illness). These specific explanations can be classified on two primary dimensions: locus of causality (internal versus external to the actor) and stability (stable versus variable over time.) For instance, failure due to lack of effort represents an internal unstable cause; failure due to task difficulty represents an external stable cause. Recently proposals have been made for the addition of a third dimension, identified by Rosenbaum (1972) as intentionality and by Litman-Adizes (Note 3) as controllability.

Research (summarized in Weiner, 1974) has documented various consequences of causal attributions. It has been found that a person's expectations and persistence on a task are significantly affected by the dimension of stability. For example, individuals who have failed expect that they may do better in the future and show greater persistence if they attribute their failure to an unstable cause (e.g. luck or low effort). Links between attributions and affects have also been found. For instance, feelings of pride for success and shame for failure are associated with internal attributions.

In the following section, we explore the kinds of causal explanations people give for loneliness. Next, the applicability of dimensions of internality, stability and controllability to attributions of loneliness is examined. Finally, data are presented on the consequences that causal attributions have for the lonely person and for the reactions others have to the lonely person.

Perceived Causes of Loneliness

People's explanations of the causes of loneliness are quite varied. In a questionnaire administered at UCLA (Berke & Peplau, Note 4), 270 undergraduates were asked to describe the reasons for loneliness among college students. Many people emphasized the difficulty of the *situation*. For example:

> 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. And even if one can form friendships, unless you're in the same class, you rarely see one another.

Another student voiced a similar reason, adding that because of "the diverse people at UCLA, it's not always easy to find your group."

Other students identified characteristics of the lonely person as the main reason for loneliness. Many students pointed to *lack of effort* as the key factor:

> 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.

Or:

> (The main reason is) failure to make an effort on their part to do something about their situation — change patterns, get involved in new activities, move to a new environment.

Other students suggested that the lonely person lacked *social skills:*

> I think the major reason is that people haven't learned the social skills necessary for meeting people.

Finally, some students emphasized such personality characteristics as "shyness", "lack of self confidence and/or self-esteem", and "afraid to introduce themselves to meet people".

Many of these free responses seem to correspond to Weiner's categories of task difficulty (large, impersonal situation), lack of effort, or lack of ability (poor social skills). Some specific causes, however, were difficult to categorize. For example, is shyness seen as an enduring personality trait akin to ability, or is it perceived as an unstable characteristic like effort?

A second study (Michela & Peplau, Note 5) was designed to investigate causal attributions for loneliness more closely. It sought to determine whether dimensions of internality, stability and controllability previously developed for intellectual performance were applicable to loneliness. The study also attempted to clarify the meaning of causes such as "shy". Undergraduates at UCLA read a brief description of a person who had been lonely for six months due to having no emotional or romantic attachment with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Thirteen possible causes for this loneliness (derived from open-ended responses in the earlier study) were provided on questionnaires. The causes were arranged in all their possible pairings, and students judged how similar each cause was to every other cause. These similarity judgments were then analyzed using a multidimensional scaling procedure to determine perceived underlying dimensions.

Results generally supported Weiner's dimensions. A dimension of *internality* was identified, with the most internal causes being "physical unattractiveness", being "afraid of rejection", being "too shy" and "doesn't try hard enough". The most external causes were "impersonal situations", "no opportunities", and "others have their own groups". A dimension of *stability* also emerged. The two most stable causes were "unpleasant personality" and "physical unattractiveness". The most unstable ones were "too shy", "doesn't try hard enough" and "doesn't know what to do". It is of interest that students perceive both shyness and not knowing what to do as unstable characteristics.

Finally, a third dimension appeared which has tentatively been labeled *controllability*. Causes seen as *un*controllable included "physical unattractiveness", "others have their own groups", "no opportunities" and "no luck". The controllable causes were "doesn't try hard enough", "too shy", "doesn't know what to do", and "unpleasant personality". This dimension is of particular interest because of research discussed earlier linking loneliness to perceived personal control. It appears that two rather different lines of research converge to suggest the importance of perceived control for the experience of loneliness.

These results lend support to Weiner's general model of attributions, and demonstrate its applicability to loneliness. The set of specific causes given by college students in this sample undoubtedly differs from the set of causes that would be given by middle-aged or old people. It seems likely, however, that similar underlying dimensions would be relevant to groups other than college students.

The next section discusses later studies in which we have begun to explore the consequences of causal attributions.

Personal Consequences of Attributions

Weiner's model suggests that causal attributions for loneliness should affect the person's expectations for the future, emotions and behaviour. The stability dimension should be especially important for future expectations. One study (reported in Peplau, Russell, & Heim, in press) with college students provides indirect support for this prediction. If students

perceived the cause of another person's loneliness to be stable, they anticipated that the person would continue to be lonely in the future.

In a recent paper, Weiner, Russell & Lerman (1978) have discussed links between attributions and emotions. Based on their analysis, internal attributions for failure should magnify such feelings as shame and inadequacy. Stable internal attributions (ability, personality) for failure should be linked to feelings of depression and hopelessness. Attributing one's own failure to others should lead to greater feelings of hostility and aggression.

Preliminary data from a college sample (reported in Peplau et al., in press) indicate significant relationships between reasons for loneliness and feelings of depression, helplessness and despair. In a free response format, depression was mentioned more frequently when a stable cause (either ability or task difficulty) was given than when an unstable cause (effort or luck) was given. Self reports of helplessness and despair were uniquely associated with internal attributions to lack of ability.

The possibility that attributions mediate the impact of loneliness on affective states may help to clarify one of the inconsistencies in the existing literature on loneliness. Two seemingly contradictory views of loneliness have been expressed. On the one hand, some authors consider loneliness arousing. Sullivan (1953) believed that loneliness was a "driving" force that motivates people to initiate social interaction despite the anxiety such interaction may arouse. On the other hand, several authors have linked loneliness and depression (Bradburn, 1969; Leiderman, 1969; Ortega 1969). Our data suggest that depression is most likely to accompany loneliness when the person perceives the cause of the problem to be stable. A recent attributional analysis of depression (Litman-Adizes, Note 3) postulates that depression is associated with attributions that are stable, and also internal and uncontrollable. In this view, loneliness should not be associated with depression if the cause of the loneliness is perceived to be unstable. This appears to be an important direction for future research.

Finally, attributions may affect how a person copes with loneliness. Several attributional studies (e.g. Dweck & Reppucci, 1973; Mazo & Perlman, 1977) suggest that people who attribute their behaviour to internal and unstable causes (e.g. effort) cope more persistently and effectively. The applicability of this finding to lonely individuals needs to be tested. Additionally, attributions about the cause of loneliness may provide cues about the sorts of coping behaviours that are needed and so may direct the focus of coping. Data from a study of college students (Peplau, Russell, & Heim, in press) indicate that attributions of loneliness to lack of effort were associated with reports of trying harder to make friends. In contrast, external attributions to a difficult situation were associated with looking for new activities in order to meet people. The locus of the cause appears to be the locus of attempted solutions.

Reactions to Lonely Others

While 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 lonely others has frequently been noted (e.g. Weiss, 1973). It is even possible that this pattern of avoidance may affect the behaviour of health professionals (Burnside, 1971). Attributions about the cause of a person's loneliness may have important effects on the reactions of non-lonely others.

Two studies of college students (reported more fully in Peplau, Russell, & Heim, in press) provide evidence on this point. In both studies, students responded to written descriptions of

a lonely college student. Results indicated that the degree of sympathy and liking for the lonely student was significantly affected by attributions. These data provide initial support for three generalizations. First, people are more sympathetic when loneliness is attributed to factors outside the individual, such as being in a new community or attending a large impersonal school. In contrast, personal or dispositional attributions increase the tendency to blame and reject the lonely person. Second, the extent to which the lonely person could control or prevent the loneliness is important. Sympathy is greater for people who had little control over the initiation of their loneliness. Finally, the degree of effort that a lonely person exerts to overcome his or her loneliness is important. A person perceived as trying hard to overcome loneliness is viewed more positively than a person who makes little effort. These and other hypotheses derived from attribution theory appear to be promising areas for further research.

Central Issues

Viewed in broad perspective, our cognitive analysis suggests that lonely people ask three basic and interrelated questions about their loneliness: Who's to blame? Will it change? What control do I have? Differences among possible answers to these questions have important consequences.

The *theme of blame* recurs in discussions of loneliness. A basic dichotomy appears to be whether loneliness is blamed on the self or on the person's situation. This distinction is illustrated in a study by Lowenthal (1964). She identified three groups of old people who had been at least semi-isolated for some time. A group she called the "alienated" had never developed close relationships and appeared not to desire any. A second group, the "defeated" had tried and failed to establish enduring relationships. Many had been married and divorced at least once. These people tended "to blame themselves for their poor adjustment" (p. 65). The consequences of self-blame were sometimes striking. While none of the "alienated" had ever attempted suicide, three of 22 "defeated" individuals had done so. A third group, the "blamers" had also tried and failed in attempts to establish social relationships, but they "tended to blame others or circumstances for their suffering" (p. 66). Lowenthal suggested that self-blame may be associated with greater withdrawal than blaming others. We can speculate that blaming others may also be associated with greater hostility and resentment.

Two factors may affect whether people blame themselves versus external factors. Time is probably quite important. It is easy to attribute short-term loneliness to temporary circumstances, such as a recent move or divorce. Over time, however, situational explanations may become less plausible. For instance, a middle-aged woman interviewed by Suzanne Gordon (1976) had for several years made repeated attempts to meet people by going to singles clubs, dances and encounter groups. In talking about her loneliness, she said, "Oh, I know . . . I can't blame it on anyone else" (p. 200).

Second, relatively enduring individual differences in beliefs about the extent to which people generally are responsible for their successes and failures may be relevant. For example, strong beliefs that the world is a just place, where people usually get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Rubin & Peplau, 1975) should increase self-blame.

Similarly, strong beliefs that people's outcomes are typically due to internal versus external factors (Rotter, 1966) may also increase self-blame.

A second *theme of hopelessness* is also important in loneliness. Gordon (1976) writes that "Hopelessness is part of the vicious cycle of loneliness and it is often difficult to detect because it may masquarade as its opposite . . . , blind hope" (p. 28). The pain of loneliness is compounded if people can forsee no possibility of change. Transient loneliness is unpleasant; loneliness perceived to be permanent is much worse. Hope of alleviating loneliness is closely linked to both perceived control and stability. Hope should be greatest if the causes of loneliness are changeable (unstable) and can be controlled by the lonely individual.

The experience of loneliness is never chosen. But choice may be involved in the events that precipitate and/or maintain loneliness. For instance, the lonely widow has no choice about her husband's death; that event is uncontrollable and unchangeable. But the widow does have some choice about whether to alleviate loneliness by seeking new relationships. Hope is affected not only by perceptions of the initial cause of loneliness, but also by perceptions of factors that perpetuate loneliness and impede establishment of satisfactory relationships.

A crucial factor affecting hope appears to be age. The optimism of youth declines with advancing age. For instance, while most college students believe that new friendships can be established relatively easily, old people do not. One study of widows over age 50 (Lopata, 1969) found that 71% of these women felt that old friends could not be replaced, no matter how much one tried to make new friends. Additional evidence that old people believe it is "too late" to start over again comes from a study of people using a special telephone helpline for the widowed (Abrahams, 1972). Loneliness was the main problem for three-fourths of the callers. However, "younger persons, even though widowed a long time, were more likely than older persons to be seeking new relationships" (p. 58).

With age, the events that typically precipitate changes in a person's achieved social relationships tend to become less positive and less voluntary. For instance, the termination of a close relationship among young adults most typically involves the breakup of a dating relationship; for older people termination more often results from divorce or the death of a spouse. Similarly, for younger people, separation from family and friends is often motivated by a personal decision to pursue a college education or take a job elsewhere; for old people, separation may be induced because others move away, or because the old person is housebound, or hospitalized. The loneliness resulting from status changes is more often tied to role gains for younger people (e.g. getting a promotion, becoming married, having a baby), and to role loss for older people (e.g. departure of children from the home, retirement). In very general terms, the forces that disrupt social relations change with age and may become less easily controllable.

People's perceptions of the causes of loneliness also vary with age. In our studies of college students, the majority of young adults believed that the causes of loneliness were changeable. For instance, problems such as shyness or attending a large university could, with effort, be overcome. In striking contrast, Tunstall's (1967) study of old people found that loneliness was typically attributed to factors that could not easily be alleviated. Nearly half the old people studied cited widowhood as the main reason for their loneliness; the rest cited being housebound, being ill or blind. Nearly half the old people felt that *nothing* could alleviate their loneliness. In part, this is because loneliness is often attributed to the process of aging,

which is seen as irreversible. "The lonely attribute being lonely . . . to increasing age. Nine in ten of those who answered think they are more lonely now than when they were younger. Moreover, the majority think that all old people get more lonely with increasing age" (Tunstall, 1967, p. 93). Typical of this pessimistic attitude is a women interviewed by Gordon (1976). Asked why she didn't share an apartment with another woman to ease her loneliness, she explained, "I am too old to change" (p. 183). We do not know whether this belief that loneliness is inescapable in old age is necessarily true. But it is clear that the belief itself may become a self-fulfilling prophecy, causing people to make few attempts to alleviate a situation perceived as unchangeable.

This preliminary cognitive analysis of loneliness leaves many questions unanswered. Research designed to further our understanding of the ways lonely people perceive and think about their loneliness is needed. Finally, attempts to incorporate a cognitive perspective into programs designed to help the lonely may be a fruitful direction for mental health practitioners to pursue.

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Résumé

Cet article présente une analyse cognitive de la solitude. Bien que l'article porte sur la solitude en général, il prête une attention particulière à la solitude chez les vieillards. Une définition de la solitude est tout d'abord présentée selon laquelle la solitude prendrait place lorsque les relations sociales d'une personne sont moins nombreuses ou moins satisfaisantes que cette personne ne le désire. La discussion porte ensuite sur les facteurs qui causent la solitude, soit en changeant les aspirations sociales d'une personne, soit en changeant ses relations sociales elles-mêmes. Le processus selon lequel l'individu vient à se désigner à titre

de solitaire et le contrôle que l'individu perçoit pouvoir exercer dans ses relations interpersonnelles, sont deux des facteurs qui sont examinés tout particulièrement. Finalement, l'article considère les causes auxquelles les gens attribuent leur propre solitude, et examine les relations entre celles-ci et certaines conséquences de la solitude telles que les réactions émotionnelles et la façon dont l'individu aborde la solitude.