L O N E L I N E S S

A SOURCEBOOK OF CURRENT THEORY, RESEARCH AND THERAPY

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Chapter 9

Loneliness and Self-Evaluation

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Emotional isolation is hard for anyone to endure; it becomes a calamity, however, if it coincides with apprehensions and uncertainties about one's self.

KAREN HORNEY, 1937, p. 286

A basic feature of human life is the desire to understand ourselves and to construct meaningful accounts of our experiences. Self-evaluation—the process of learning about and judging ourselves—is an important element in the experience of loneliness.

This chapter considers three ways in which self-evaluation processes influence loneliness. We look first at how people label themselves as lonely, and consider cognitive discrepancy models of loneliness. Such models emphasize that loneliness occurs when people perceive that their social relations are deficient in some important way. We next examine people's causal attributions for loneliness. The explanations people construct for their loneliness can influence the feelings and behaviors that accompany the experience of loneliness. Finally, we consider the reciprocal relationship of loneliness and self-esteem. Evidence suggests that low self-esteem puts people at risk for loneliness. Further, since social relations are a core component of our self-conception, persistent loneliness can lead to feelings of worthlessness and lowered self-esteem. A central theme in this chapter is that cognitive processes color the experience of loneliness, shaping our feelings and guiding our actions.

COGNITIVE APPRAISAL: PERCEIVING AND LABELING LONELINESS

It is often difficult to label subjective experiences accurately (Gordon, 1981; Pennebaker, 1980), to decide if one is really lonely, or to distinguish lone-

liness from other psychological states. Labeling ourself as lonely results from an inferential process by which we recognize or give meaning to our unique, personal experiences, and map them onto a more general category or concept.

The Self-Diagnosis of Loneliness

In arriving at the conclusion, "I am lonely," people use affective, behavioral, and cognitive cues. The affective signs of loneliness are often diffuse. Loneliness is a distressing emotional experience; severely lonely people are profoundly unhappy. It is unlikely, however, that affective cues alone are sufficient to identify an unpleasant experience as loneliness. There is no unique set of emotions associated with loneliness. Rubenstein and Shaver (Chapter 13), for example, identified four distinct clusters of feelings that can accompany loneliness. Although the experience of negative affect may alert people that "something is wrong" in their life, it will not invariably lead to a self-diagnosis of being lonely, rather than being depressed, overworked, or physically ill.

Behavioral cues, like affective ones, contribute to a self-diagnosis of loneliness, but are probably not sufficient for such a diagnosis. People may use a variety of behavioral cues to identify loneliness, including low levels of social contact, disruptions in established relationships, or unsatisfying patterns of contact, disruptions in established relationships, or unsatisfying patterns of social interaction. Spending time alone is not invariably associated with loneliness, however; people can be happy in solitude. But when people are unhappy because they are too often alone, then loneliness may be a plausible diagnosis.

It is unlikely that people label themselves as lonely unless cognitive cues are also present. Cognitive indicators of loneliness probably revolve around the theme of wanting a type of social relation that is currently lacking (see also Horowitz, French, & Anderson, Chapter 12). Common cognitions include the desire for more frequent or more intimate interaction, and the belief that improved social relations would alleviate one's distress.

People identify the experience of loneliness on the basis of a cluster of feelings, behaviors, and thoughts—not from a single defining feature. Horowitz and his associates refer to this set of characteristics as a "prototype" of the lonely person. Horowitz et al. have identified the major elements of the loneliness prototype in college students. They found much commonality in the meaning college students attach to loneliness, but also important individual variations. Not everyone uses the concept of loneliness in precisely the same way.

The meaning of loneliness may differ across social groups, life stages, historical periods, and cultural boundaries. An illustration of such variations comes from anthropological reports of the use of the term loneliness in different cultures. According to Levy's (1973) ethnography of the Tahitians, there exist "no . . . terms for loneliness in the sense of being depressed or sad

because of the lack of friends, companionship, and so on" (p. 306). Levy noted that the absence of a specific word for loneliness would not necessarily prevent people from expressing the concept in other terms. Nonetheless, themes of loneliness were rare in his interviews. In contrast, Briggs (1970) described Eskimos as having several different words for loneliness. "Hujuujaq" is the most general term, meaning "to be unhappy because of the absence of other people." "Pai" refers more specifically to "being or feeling left behind; to miss a person who has gone." Finally, "tumak" indicates being "silent and withdrawn" in unhappiness, especially because of the absence of other people. The way in which linguistic categories and folk beliefs affect the individual's experience of loneliness is an important area for further investigation.

Cognitive Discrepancy Models of Loneliness

The importance of cognitive processes in the experience of loneliness has been emphasized in *cognitive discrepancy models*. While not denying that loneliness has affective and behavioral elements, cognitive models focus on subjective perceptions and standards. Cognitive discrepancy models define loneliness as a response to the perception that one's social relations fail to measure up to some internal yardstick (de Jong-Gierveld, 1978; Derlega & Margulis, Chapter 10; Lopata, 1969; Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Loneliness is affected not only by the person's actual social ties, but also by the person's desired pattern or standard for social relations. A discrepancy model thus examines loneliness from the "insider's" perspective, focusing on how the lonely person perceives and evaluates her or his social life, not on how outside observers might assess it. Although two people may have "objectively" similar patterns of social relations, one may feel lonely, and the other content. Loneliness can be heightened or reduced by changes in a person's subjective standards for relationships. For example, a person whose relationships remain constant might nonetheless start to feel lonely if her or his standards are raised.

Loneliness theorists have described relationship standards in quite general terms. For example, Peplau and Perlman (1979) referred to peoples' "desired or preferred" patterns of social relations. Gordon (1976) discussed a sense of being deprived of "certain expected human relationships." It is useful to take a closer look at how people assess the adequacy of their social relations and decide that they are lonely.

Personal Standards for Relationships

People are motivated to evaluate themselves, their experiences, and their relationships (Festinger, 1954; Pettigrew, 1967; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Subjective assessments of the quantity and quality of interpersonal ties are comparative, and involve judging oneself against a variety of standards. Such

standards are not always explicit or consciously articulated. But they are reflected in common complaints of lonely people: "I wish I had more friends" or "No one really understands me."

Subjective standards for relationships are derived in two ways. First, *past experience* leads us to develop images of the kinds of social interactions and relationships that make us feel satisfied and happy, and those that do not. We learn about our social needs and how they can be adequately met. According to Thibaut and Kelley (1959):

> As a result of many experiences in many relationships, the person develops a general and relatively constant expectation of the satisfaction he can achieve in association with others—a generalized conception of his worth in interpersonal relationships. (p. 97)

We compare our social relations to this generalized standard or "comparison level," feeling unhappy if our current social life is worse than it used to be.

The importance of such standards is illustrated by several studies. For example, Cutrona and Peplau (1979; Chapter 18) asked college students to evaluate their current friendships and dating relationships, and to compare them to the relationships they had had in high school. The perception that present relationships were worse than previous ones was associated with current social dissatisfaction and loneliness. Similarly, Lowenthal and Robinson (1976) reported that for old people, "the concept of the former self" is a major reference point for evaluating current experiences (see also Townsend, 1957).

Second, *social comparisons* often influence our self-evaluations (see theoretical reviews by Pettigrew, 1967; Suls & Miller, 1977). We assess our interpersonal relations in comparison to those of other people. For example, Cutrona and Peplau (1979, Chapter 18) found that students' perception that their own relationships were worse than those of peers was significantly linked to social dissatisfaction and loneliness.

An important unresolved question in social comparison theory concerns how people select reference groups or standards. In the interpersonal domain, there has been some speculation about this matter, but little empirical research. For example, Townsend (1957) proposed that old people can experience different types of social isolation based on different comparisons: peer-contrasted isolation (comparison to age mates), generation-contrasted isolation (comparison to younger people), and preceding-cohort isolation (comparison to earlier generations of old people). Unfortunately, we have little information about the sorts of social comparisons that actually influence social dissatisfaction and loneliness.

Personal standards for social relations are not fixed, but can change over time. Many factors might cause such changes. First, there may be age-related development changes in a person's desires for social relations. Gail Sheehy (1976) noted that for many professionally successful people, "mid-life may be a time to relax . . . and put more . . . into cultivating friendships, being

a companion" (p. 415). Second, experiences such as psychotherapy or consciousness-raising groups can lead individuals to reassess the quality of their social relations and to set new relationship goals. Third, processes of adaptation may also be at work, so that a person's current pattern of social relations influences his or her relationship standards. The person whose social life is extremely full and rewarding may come to expect high levels of satisfaction from relationships. Conversely, Weiss (1973) has suggested that when individuals are lonely for a long time, they might "change their standards for appraising their situations and their feelings, and, in particular, that standards might shrink to conform more closely to the shape of a bleak reality" (p. 228). These are just a few of the factors that can lead to changes in personal standards for social relations.

A useful direction for future loneliness research is to examine more closely the evaluative standards that people use in judging social relations. Research on judgments of psychological well-being (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976) provides a helpful resource. For example, Andrews and Withey (1976) identified eight different "models for evaluation" that may influence assessments of personal happiness. They distinguished, for instance, an "ideal" standard versus a minimally "good enough" standard versus a standard of temporal improvement. Other standards might emphasize personal goals or aspirations for relationships, predictive experiences about the social relations a person is likely to have, or normative expectations about the social ties a person "should" have. At present there are no clear empirical or theoretical grounds for deciding how best to conceptualize the personal standards for social relations that affect loneliness. Andrews and Withey suggested that different standards may operate for different people or at different times, and that a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of evaluation must await extensive basic research. An adequate cognitive analysis of loneliness will require a more precise specification of the nature of personal standards for social relations.

Implications for Helping the Lonely

What are the implications of a cognitive discrepancy model for helping the lonely? If loneliness occurs when people want more or better social relationships than they have, then it might seem that a sensible way to reduce loneliness is simply to lower one's personal standards. We urge caution in adopting such a strategy. For many people, the decision to lower one's standards might in itself be seen as an admission of failure and inadequacy.

It does seem useful for lonely people to scrutinize carefully their expectations and goals for social relationships. Unrealistic standards about friendship or marriage may create unnecessary difficulties (Lederer & Jackson, 1968). Zimbardo's (1977) advice to shy people may be equally applicable to the lonely: be careful in choosing models for comparison. In his words:

> Some people are inappropriate comparison targets because they are uniquely gifted with looks or with brains, or with a desirable physique or other inherited

qualities. I'd like to look like Robert Redford, think like Einstein, talk like Richard Burton, and write as prolifically and as well as Isaac Asimov. Ideals can be emulated, but should not be the established measures of success, status, or accomplishment. (p. 154)

Lonely people may do well to examine carefully their personal standards for relationships.

Loneliness may increase people's tendency to develop inaccurate or distorted standards for social relationships. Fearing that public comparisons would expose their failings, lonely people may conceal their feelings of dissatisfaction from others and avoid discussions about social matters (cf. Brickman & Bulman, 1977). As a result, lonely people may never learn about social problems experienced by their peers and so may erroneously assume that everyone else has a trouble-free social life. Further, lonely people may rely heavily on the media for social comparison standards, a source likely to foster unrealistic expectations for social relations.

Cognitive reassessment is not a foolproof remedy for loneliness. Many lonely people have standards for social relations that are "reasonable"—arising from basic social needs and consistent with their own past experience and with cultural norms. Not surprisingly, few of the college students we studied (see Chapter 21, Table 21.3) said that they coped with loneliness by lowering their goals for social relationships. For many people, overcoming loneliness requires improving social relationships, not changing subjective standards.

CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS FOR LONELINESS

The judgment that our social life is inadequate and that we are suffering from loneliness is seldom the end point in self-evaluation. Lonely people also seek to explain the causes of their plight. Discovering the reasons for one's loneliness helps make sense out of a distressing situation and is a first step toward alleviating the problem. A particularly important issue for lonely people may be self-blame—is the loneliness my own fault?

Personal Accounts of Loneliness

People attempt to construct an organized account of their loneliness, not merely a listing of possible reasons (cf. Schank & Abelson, 1977). This point is illustrated in Weiss's (1975) discussion of accounts of 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 in a conceptually manageable unity. (p. 15)

In analogous fashion, lonely people attempt to construct an organized explanation of their unsatisfactory social life.

Personal accounts of loneliness include three interrelated but distinct elements. First, lonely people can usually point to a *precipitating* event that led to the onset of their loneliness, such as the end of a love relationship. Second, in trying to explain why their loneliness persists over time and why they are unable to form satisfying social bonds, people explore the *maintaining causes* of their loneliness. These typically concern characteristics of the self (e.g., being too shy) or of the situation (e.g., being in a setting where it is hard to meet new people). Finally, lonely people typically have some idea of the sorts of changes in their social relations that would alleviate their loneliness. These *anticipated solutions* might include making new friends or developing greater intimacy in an existing relationship. The focus of research on attributions for loneliness has been on people's explanations for the maintaining causes of their loneliness.

Attributions for loneliness are not necessarily precise. People may be genuinely puzzled or confused about the reasons for their distress. And they may consider a number of casual factors. Initial attributions may lead to informal hypothesis testing behavior (cf. Wortman & Dintzner, 1978). For example, speculating that loneliness is due to one's appearance might lead to a new diet or hairstyle. If these changes make no difference, then the person may consider other causal attributions more plausible (Kelley, 1971). Thus explanations for loneliness may change with the passage of time.

Attributional analyses of loneliness (Anderson, 1980; Bragg, 1979; Peplau, Russell, & Heim, 1979) have been based largely on the theoretical work of Weiner and his associates (e.g., Weiner, 1974; Weiner, in press; Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1978). Weiner has demonstrated that causal attributions can be classified along two primary dimensions: locus of causality (internal or personal versus external or situational) and stability (constant versus changeable over time). More recently, Weiner has proposed the addition of a third dimension of controllability, concerning whether the person is believed to have control over their behavior or not.

Several studies conducted at UCLA (reviewed in Peplau et al., 1979) have demonstrated the applicability of Weiner's model to loneliness. For example, Michela, Peplau, and Weeks (1981) used multidimensional scaling to examine students' perceptions of common causes of loneliness. Results indicated that dimensions of internality and stability were salient in lay conceptions of the causes of loneliness. For instance, lack of effort was seen as an internal, unstable cause of loneliness; being physically unattractive as an internal, stable cause; and lack of opportunities as an external, unstable cause. Controllability did not emerge as a third dimension; rather, only causes such as effort that were both internal and unstable were seen as controllable. Available evidence suggests that people conceptualize the causes of loneliness on the basis of whether they reflect something about the self versus the setting, and whether they are relatively permanent or changeable.

The Consequences of Causal Attributions

Attributions for loneliness can have important implications for a person's future expectancies, emotions and behavior.

Loneliness is often depicted as accompanied by pessimism and hopelessness (low future expectancy). Fromm-Reichmann (1959) suggested that severe loneliness is characterized by "paralyzing hopelessness and unutterable futility" (p. 7). Attribution theory predicts that stable explanations for failure should lead to lower expectancies for future performance. At least one study (Michela, Peplau, & Weeks, 1981) supported this prediction for loneliness. Believing that loneliness was due to unchangeable features of the self or the situation was linked to pessimism and hopelessness.

Loneliness can be accompanied by a variety of emotions. One prediction from attribution theory is that depression should accompany attributions that are internal and stable. Preliminary support has been found for this idea (Peplau et al., 1979). For example, Bragg (1979) reported that among lonely college students, more severe depression was associated with attributing loneliness to one's physical appearance, personality, and fear of rejection.

Finally, causal attributions can influence the behavior and coping responses of lonely individuals. Anderson (1980; Chapter 12) provided evidence of this effect. He found that lonely college students tended to attribute interpersonal failures to unchangeable character defects (low ability, personality traits) rather than to changeable personal factors (lack of effort, use of ineffective strategies) or to situational factors. In a second study, Anderson demonstrated that this attributional style was associated with less effective behavior in an interpersonal persuasion task. Students who made ability or trait attributions showed lower success expectancies, lower motivation, and were actually less successful at the task than were students who made effort or strategy attributions. Similarly, Goetz and Dweck (1980) have shown that children who attribute social rejection to personal incompetence cope less effectively. Goetz and Dweck argued that even socially skilled children may misattribute social rebuffs to lack of ability and, as a result, respond less successfully. Finally, Cutrona (Chapter 18) presented data linking attributions to the persistence of loneliness over time. She compared attributions for loneliness made by students who subsequently recovered from loneliness and from students who remained lonely seven months later. The initial attributions of students who remained lonely were more internal and gave greater emphasis to their own personality, shyness, fear of rejection, and lack of knowledge about how to initiate relationships.

Research is accumulating to demonstrate the link between causal attributions and reactions to loneliness. Whether people respond to loneliness with depression or hostility, with passive withdrawal or active striving, may depend on their personal explanations for loneliness. We have discussed these results as though attributions are causal factors in determining expectancies, emotions, and behaviors. We are convinced that this does occur. But other causal links are also possible. For example, individuals who attribute their loneliness

to lack of interpersonal skill may actually be inept; their poor social skills may cause both their attributions and their lack of success in social settings. Further research is needed to clarify the causal relationship of attributions and reactions to loneliness.

Implications for Helping the Lonely

Lonely people seek to understand their problem in order to alleviate it. Causal attributions can influence lonely people's motivation to improve their social life and guide their coping behavior. If attempts to overcome loneliness are misdirected at unimportant or inaccurate causes, they are unlikely to succeed and so may ultimately lead to feelings of lowered personal control. Thus a major goal of counseling or 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.

It may be especially helpful for the lonely person to sustain some sense of personal control over his or her social relations, and yet at the same time to avoid destructive tendencies toward self-derogation. In this regard, Janoff-Bulman's (1980) distinction between two types of self-blame is pertinent. *Behavorial self-blame* involves attributing results to changeable features of one's behavior, such as lack of effort or use of ineffective strategies. Such attributions should foster the belief that by modifying one's behavior, better results can be achieved in the future (see also Weiner, in press). In contrast, *characterological self-blame* involves attributions to relatively unmodifiable aspects of the self, such as one's personality or ability. Janoff-Bulman argued that characterological self-blame is associated with depression and with believing that one deserves one's fate. The question of how attributions for loneliness influence self-esteem is discussed further in the next section.

LONELINESS AND SELF-ESTEEM

Lonely people often feel worthless, incompetent, and unlovable. Indeed the link between severe loneliness and low self-esteem is one of the most consistent findings of loneliness research (Jones, Chapter 15; Moore & Sermat, 1974; Paloutzian & Ellison, Chapter 14; Wood, 1978). For example, Loucks (1980) found that loneliness was significantly correlated with self-criticism, low self-esteem, and "uncertainty of self-view." Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona (1980) found a correlation of —.49 between scores on the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale and the Texas Social Behavior Inventory, a measure of social self-esteem. In a large-scale survey, Rubenstein and Shaver (Chapter 13) found that self-depreciation, including feelings of being unattractive, stupid, and ashamed, was a common correlate of loneliness.

Although the link between loneliness and low self-esteem has been firmly established, the reasons for this association have not been precisely specified. We agree with Wood (1978) that the relationship of loneliness to self-esteem can reflect several different causal processes; low self-esteem may be both a

cause and a consequence of loneliness. Although we acknowledge the recip-rocal links between loneliness and self-esteem, we find it analytically useful to examine first ways in which low self-esteem can foster loneliness, and then ways in which loneliness can impair self-esteem.

Low Self-Esteem as a Cause of Loneliness

Two major views of how self-esteem affects loneliness can be distinguished. The first suggests that intrapsychic self-estrangement is a cause of loneliness. The second proposes that low self-esteem is accompanied by a set of attitudes and behaviors that hinder satisfying social interaction and so create the con-ditions for loneliness.

Loneliness as Self-Estrangement

Early psychological analyses of loneliness focused on the person's self-concep-tion. Rogers (1961) discussed loneliness as an estrangement between the person and his or her true inner feelings. Rogers believed that in searching for acceptance and love, people often develop facades, and so become alien-ated from themselves. Whitehorn (1961) concurred in this position:

Some substantial incongruity between the self as felt and the self as reacted to by others generates and accentuates a feeling of loneliness, and this process may become a vicious cycle of loneliness and estrangement. (p. 16)

Thus these theorists proposed that loneliness originates in the individual's perception of a discrepancy between his or her "real" self and the way others view them.

A few studies have tested this idea. Eddy (1961) hypothesized that lone-liness is related to discrepancies among three aspects of self-concept: the person's self-view (actual self), the person's ideal self, and the person's view of how others see him or her (reflected self). Using a sample of students in the Merchant Marine Academy, Eddy found strong support for these predic-tions. Loneliness was correlated .71 with the discrepancy of actual and ideal self, .71 with the discrepancy of actual and reflected self, and .63 with the discrepancy of ideal and reflected self. In accord with Eddy's belief that perceptions are more important than objective features of social interaction, no relationship was found between loneliness and actual popularity ratings by classmates. In a later study, Sisenwein (1964) took a somewhat different perspective, hypothesizing that loneliness results from a discrepancy between how people view themselves and how others actually view them. Contrary to expectation, Sisenwein found no relationship between loneliness and dis-crepancies of self versus other ratings. In a more recent study, however, Lowenthal, Thurnher and Chiriboga (1976) reported greater loneliness among older men whose self-ratings differed from those of others (i.e., the interviewer). The importance of self-estrangement as a source of loneliness deserves further empirical investigation.

Self-Esteem and Social Competence

Low self-esteem is often part of a package of beliefs and behaviors that inter-fere with initiating or maintaining satisfying social relationships. People with low self-esteem may interpret social interactions in self-defeating ways. They may be more likely to attribute social failures to internal, self-blaming factors (Ickes & Layden, 1978; Weiner, in press). People who devalue themselves may assume that others will similarly find them undesirable (Jones, Chapter 15). They may also have more extreme reactions to social invitations and rebuffs (see review in Berscheid & Walster, 1978). In studies that have experimentally altered people's self-esteem, it appears that low self-esteem individuals are especially responsive to a friendly confederate, but feel espe-cially hostile toward a rejecting confederate. Perhaps most important, people low in self-esteem may interpret ambiguous social exchanges in more negative ways than do people with high self-esteem (Jacobs, Berscheid, & Walster, 1971).

Low self-esteem can also affect people's social behavior. Zimbardo (1977) argued that: "The person with low self-esteem . . . is likely to be more pas-sive, persuasible and less popular. These people are overly sensitive to criticism, thinking it confirms their inadequacy. They have difficulty accept-ing compliments" (p. 152). People with low self-esteem may be more socially anxious and less willing to take risks in social settings, hence less likely to start new relationships or deepen existing ones.

In some instances, low self-esteem reflects an inaccurate assessment of the person's social skills. It is not uncommon for attractive, competent individuals to perceive themselves and their behavior as inept (Zimbardo, 1977). But in other cases, low self-esteem reflects actual deficits in the skills necessary to begin or sustain social relations (Horowitz et al., Chapter 12).

In sum, low self-esteem is often embedded in an interrelated set of self-defeating cognitions and behaviors that impair social competence and so put people at risk for loneliness. Evidence that low self-esteem may be a causal factor in the persistence of loneliness comes from a longitudinal study by Cutrona, Russell, and Peplau (1979, Chapter 18). They found that self-esteem was an important factor in whether new college students experienced only transitory loneliness or continued to be lonely over a seven-month pe-riod. Those students scoring high in self-esteem at the beginning of the new school year were significantly more likely to overcome their loneliness and to make a successful social adjustment at college than were students with low self-esteem.

Loneliness as a Cause of Low Self-Esteem

Loneliness, especially when it is severe and prolonged, can lower a person's self-esteem. The consequences of loneliness for self-esteem are exacerbated if the loneliness is attributed to personal characteristics or defects. Further, when loneliness results from the loss of important relationships, as in divorce or

widowhood, the person must create a new conception of herself or himself—a new "social self" to replace one that has been lost.

Loneliness as Social Failure

To be without a lover, friends, or family is to have failed in the eyes of society, and often in our own eyes as well (Gordon, 1976). Milner observed, "To say 'I'm lonely' is to admit you're essentially inadequate, that you have nobody who loves you" (1975, p. 3). The absence of social relationships is not only personally distressing but socially awkward as well. Stereotypes depict people who live alone as "lonely losers"—cold, unfriendly, and unattractive (Parmelee & Werner, 1978). People often find it uncomfortable to be the only "single" at a party of couples, to eat alone in a restaurant, or to go unescorted to a movie. In a gregarious culture, the lack of friends or a mate is a social failure. Perhaps less obvious but equally important, having unsatisfying relationships—an unhappy marriage or superficial friendships—may also be seen as a social failure.

Some years ago, William James (1908) proposed that self-esteem is "a fraction of which our pretensions are the denominator, and the numerator our success; thus self-esteem = success/pretensions" (p. 187). This and other discrepancy definitions of self-esteem (Cohen, 1959; Wells & Marwell, 1976) emphasize the correspondence between people's personal ideals or aspirations and their accomplishments. Thus the perception of a social deficit can both give rise to the experience of loneliness and also detract from a person's self-esteem. The more important and salient the social deficiency, the greater should be both the person's loneliness and the decrease in their sense of personal worth. Loneliness and low self-esteem are intimately and reciprocally interrelated.

Self-Blaming Attributions for Loneliness

If, as James and others suggest, self-esteem is based on the extent to which we attain our personal goals, then any failure should harm self-esteem. In actuality, however, the effect of failure on self-esteem is mediated by the person's causal attributions for the failure (Weiner, in press). In particular, failure attributed to personal inadequacies should have greater impact on self-esteem than outcomes attributed to situational constraints. In a study of achievement-related behavior, Weiner, Russell, and Lerman (1978) reported that the emotions accompanying failure differed significantly depending on the attribution made. Attributions to external causes led to feelings such as surprise and anger that were unrelated to self-esteem. Attributions to lack of effort led to feelings of shame and guilt, presumably because the person might have done better if he or she had tried harder. Failure attributed to personality or lack of ability was associated with feeling incompetent and inadequate; such attributions may be most damaging to self-esteem (see also Janoff-Bulman, 1980)

In research explicitly focused on loneliness, we (Miceli, Morasch, & Pep-

lau, unpublished data) asked college students to evaluate a person who was lonely for one of several reasons. When the loneliness was experimentally attributed to internal causes, the person was perceived as more self-centered, less likeable, and less resourceful, and was expected to be lower in self-esteem than when the loneliness was due to external causes. Anderson (1980) presented evidence that many lonely students may adopt a self-blaming attributional style to explain their social outcomes, attributing failure to their own personality or low ability, and attributing social success to external circumstances outside their personal control.

The tendency to blame oneself for social failures may be influenced by the opinions of others. For example, Weiss (1975) suggested that in divorce, the individual's own self-condemnation may be augmented by accusations and disparagement from the former spouse. More generally, other people may blame the lonely person and so provide apparent corroboration for the individual's own feelings of personal inadequacy.

The Social Self

Our self-conception is largely based on our relationships to other people—as friend, lover, parent, child, neighbor, co-worker. "Specific persons and their behaviors get built into the contents of role-identities and become crucial to the legitimation and enactment of these identities" (McCall, 1970, p. 8). Both the loss and the absence of social relations can influence our self-conception.

The loss of important people from our lives, whether through separation, divorce, or death, often requires a reconstruction of our self-conception. Weiss (1975) observed that "with the end of their marriages, most among the separated suffer from the loss of some of the social scaffolding on which their self-definition rested" (p. 69). Widows apparently also experience a loss of self. Many of the bereaved women Parkes (1972) studied initially rejected the idea of being a widow in an effort to resist giving up their cherished identity as a wife for a new and uncertain one. The loss of important, long-established social ties has major ramifications for our self view. At least in the short run, such changes often lead to lowered self-esteem.

The absence of social relationships can also have important implications for our self-conception. Many of our life plans—to marry and live "happily ever after," to be a loyal and generous friend, to be surrounded in old age by loving grandchildren—require social relationships. For the young person on the brink of adulthood, the lack of a dating partner or spouse not only reduces current companionship, but can also thwart future dreams and goals (Schank & Abelson, 1977). Throughout life, important personal plans require "accomplices."

The Loss of Attachment in Childhood

The loss of an important relationship can be devastating at any age, but for young children the repercussions may be especially serious. In a provocative

analysis, Shaver and Rubenstein (1980) argued that when children are deprived of secure attachments to their parents, they develop models of the self and the social world that are harmful to their self-esteem and to their later social adjustment. Shaver and Rubenstein suggested that children are likely to blame themselves for the loss of a parent, especially when the loss results from divorce rather than death. The child's level of cognitive maturity at the time of the divorce may be crucial. Younger children, prone to egocentrism, are more likely to believe that they were the cause of the marital separation. The result, Shaver and Rubenstein proposed, is a loss of self-esteem and a pessimism about social relations that are hard to overcome. Even as adults, such individuals may be at special risk for loneliness and may continue to blame themselves for their social problems. Thus early attachment losses may leave a legacy of loneliness and low self-esteem.

In this section we have examined the relationship between loneliness and low self-esteem. Low self-esteem may put people at risk for loneliness, which in turn may further impair their sense of self-worth. How to break this potentially vicious cycle is an important question for loneliness researchers and therapists. Two other unresolved issues are also noteworthy. First, it is unclear whether social desirability biases, the effort by some people to present a positive image to researchers, influence the observed relationship of measures of loneliness and self-esteem. People who want to present a favorable self-image may deny being lonely and also evaluate themselves positively. Some data (see Chapter 6) suggest that loneliness measures are not significantly affected by social desirability biases, but further evidence on this point is needed. Second, the possible role of depression in explaining why severe loneliness is accompanied by low self-esteem requires closer scrutiny. In at least some cases, major social losses may set in motion not only loneliness but also severe depression, which in turn may lead individuals to adopt a negative attitude toward themselves and their self-worth (Weiner & Litman-Adizes, 1978).

CONCLUSIONS

Loneliness is a complex experience encompassing the whole person—feelings thoughts, and actions. We believe that cognitions play an important part in this experience. We do not propose that loneliness is "only in your head," nor that loneliness can be magically cured by the power of "positive thinking." We do assert, however, that a comprehensive analysis of loneliness requires an understanding of the impact of cognitive processes.

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