

## GROWING OLD AND LONELY IN DIFFERENT SOCIETIES: TOWARD A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE\*

**ABSTRACT.** The main argument of this paper is that the subjective experience of loneliness among older people must be analyzed in relation to the overall value system of society or the subcultural values of particular segments of society. Cultural or subcultural value systems are contrasted in terms of whether they give priority to *individualistic* values or to *collective* values such as family or community bonds. These differences in value systems result in important differences in people's social contacts and socioemotional bonding experiences as well as their level of satisfaction with a given level of social relationships. It is suggested that these differences must be looked at in relation to basic human needs for social bonding as well as needs for individuation. The concept of the *loneliness threshold* is introduced to identify the level of social contacts that individuals desire to avoid the experience of loneliness or emotional isolation.

*Key Words:* loneliness, loneliness threshold, individualism, collectivism, social deprivation, socioemotional bonding.

The growth in the numbers and the visibility of elderly persons has stimulated much research and speculation on their particular needs. This interest transcends national boundaries and thus lends itself to comparative analysis both at the level of demographic description and national policy and also at the level of the subjective experience of being old in different societal and cultural contexts. Such an analysis should delve deeper into the life-worlds of the elderly than is possible in studies that focus primarily on economic well-being, health, or social service needs.

One of the phenomenological experiences that has attracted increasing attention from researchers is the problem of loneliness among the elderly (Andersson 1984; Berg, Mellstrom, Persson and Svanborg 1981; Creecy, Berg and Wright 1985; Harris and Associates 1981; Peplau, Miceli and Morasch 1982; Perlman, Gerson and Spinner 1978; Revenson and Johnson 1984; Stephens and Bernstein 1984). However, this topic is most often approached from the micro level of analysis. That is, investigators typically focus on variables at the individual level or the quality or quantity of contacts the individual has with family or friends. The primary purpose of this paper is to broaden the focus by suggesting a framework that can be used in comparing the experience of loneliness among the elderly in different societies with distinctly different cultural value orientations.

The crucial importance of a phenomenological (or experiential) approach is clearly implied in the distinction that is often made between being alone and feeling lonely (Berg *et al.* 1981; Larsen, Zuzanek and

Mannell 1985; Lowenthal and Robinson 1976; Peplau *et al.* 1982; Peplau, Bikson, Rook and Goodchilds 1982; Townsend 1973; Weiss 1982). Objectively, a person may live alone and have relatively few social contacts but still seldom feel lonely. Conversely, persons may have chronic feelings of loneliness even when in a crowd or surrounded by others. The objective fact of social isolation and the subjective experience of emotional isolation are by no means equivalent (Larsen *et al.* 1985; Lopata 1969; Mullins and McNicholas 1986; Weiss 1982).

While these two variables may be related for some persons, the correlation is less than perfect. Moreover, while social isolation may be "explained" in terms of objective demographic or ecological variables, such as the density of one's community, the geographical distance from family members and close friends, the type of housing one lives in, and one's own family status (Berg *et al.* 1981; Peplau, Bikson *et al.* 1982; Perlman *et al.* 1978; Shanas 1979; Stephens and Bernstein 1984; Townsend 1968; 1973), efforts to explain the subjective experience of emotional isolation must take into account a whole array of personality variables, such as needs for affiliation, degree of independence, and self-concept (Eddy 1982; Lopata, Heinemann and Baum 1982; Sermat 1978; Shultz and Moore 1978).

It is important to distinguish among different types of subjective loneliness. Young (1982) identified three distinct types: chronic loneliness, transient loneliness, and situational loneliness. The focus of this paper is chronic loneliness, which Young defines as persistent deficiencies that people experience in their social relationships for at least two or more consecutive years. In contrast, transient loneliness refers to occasional feelings of loneliness, such as many people experience from time to time, that are not persistent for more than brief periods of time. Situational loneliness is that type which results when individuals are confronted with a specific crisis or loss, such as the death of a spouse.

Of these three types it seems reasonable to assume that it is chronic loneliness which is most clearly related to basic personality structures. Moreover, the high interdependence between personality and culture suggests that particular personality structures should vary in different types of society with different patterns of culture. Even within a particular society, especially a complex one with considerable subcultural variation, personality patterns are likely to vary considerably in different segments of society with different subcultures.

The dividing lines between these different types of loneliness are not absolute. For example, a person may experience situational loneliness as a result of a particular loss from which they never really recover; thus situational loneliness is gradually transformed into chronic loneliness. Or, episodes of transient loneliness may gradually be triggered more and more frequently, with the result that this type also fades into chronic loneliness.

The reasons for such increases could be traced to social or psychological changes that are associated with the process of growing old. The difference with situational loneliness is that there is not necessarily a specific episode which resulted in immediate feelings of acute loneliness. Instead, there are gradual changes, such as gradual attenuation of social contacts, that trigger the transformation of transient loneliness to chronic loneliness. Among the chronically lonely, however, there may be brief interludes when the acute pain of loneliness is lifted temporarily, e.g., when there is an overwhelming but temporary increase in social contacts such as at a family reunion.

Consideration of these various situations suggests that chronic loneliness is not solely a result of the type of personality structure that has developed within a person's particular cultural milieu. The structure of social relationships in which older persons are involved is also important, especially the social network of family and friends and the degree to which the members of this network fulfill the older person's needs for social contact or meet the older person's expectations (Conner, Powers and Bultena 1979; Larsen *et al.* 1985; Lowenthal and Robinson 1976; Mullins and Johnson 1986; Peplau, Bikson *et al.* 1982). An older person's needs and expectations for social interaction will no doubt reflect the cultural values the person has internalized, but the degree to which these needs and expectations are fulfilled will be heavily influenced by a person's particular social network. Thus our perspective for comparative analysis is not necessarily limited to the general cultural or subcultural environment. It can also deal with the relationship between subjective feelings of loneliness and the social networks in which older persons are involved. These networks, in turn, are affected by the type of living arrangements in which older persons are involved, their health, their socioeconomic status, their family structure, and various other indicators of opportunities for social contact.

The basic model underlying the analysis in this paper may be expressed succinctly as follows: (1) People with differences in basic personality structures vary in terms of their social needs, especially needs for sustained or intense intimate interaction with others. (2) Individuals' basic personality structures are formed in large part by the type of basic cultural value system that they have internalized. (3) Because societies differ in terms of their basic cultural value orientations, personality patterns, especially needs for social interaction, will likewise vary in different societies. (4) The crucial importance of cultural variations for personality formation also applies to subcultural variations within a complex and pluralistic society.

While these basic principles focus primarily on the intangible or subjective level, objective variables may readily be incorporated into the model. The importance of such variables and their relationship to the subjective level can be expressed as follows: (1) Societies differ in terms of the opportunities provided older persons to develop or maintain a desired

level of social contacts. (2) Similarly, within a complex or pluralistic society, different segments of society vary in the same way. These variations in objective opportunities for social contact are no doubt influenced by numerous other social structural variables, including, for example, the preferred social role for older persons, density of communities in which older persons live, specific living arrangements, marital status, health and mobility skills, socioeconomic status, and so forth.

However, in order for us to understand the nature and scope of the problem of loneliness among older persons these variations in objective opportunities for social contacts must be related to individuals' *subjective* needs and desires. Accordingly, the following basic principle is crucial: *For any particular level of opportunity for social contacts, a person's evaluation of its adequacy or deficiency is based on a subjective comparison (not necessarily conscious) of that level with the level of social interaction that is expected, needed, or desired.* Expectations, needs, and desires, in turn, result in large part from basic personality structure. Because of the difference among people in this regard, the concept of the *loneliness threshold* is introduced as a potentially crucial personality variable. The loneliness threshold can be defined as the minimal level of social contact that is needed for a person to avoid the subjective experience of loneliness. Although this is a personality variable it is influenced profoundly by the basic cultural or subcultural value system that the individual has internalized.

#### CONTRASTING VALUE ORIENTATIONS OF DIFFERENT SOCIETIES

Because this model deals explicitly with cultural value systems as the basis for personality formation, it is essential for us to examine the crucial components of broad-scale cultural value orientations (cf. Parsons 1951). The magnitude of this task would make it presumptuous to attempt a comprehensive comparative analysis of the cultural value systems of different societies. However, there is one dimension of value systems that is crucial for helping us understand the problem of loneliness. This dimension is the dilemma of *individualism* versus some form of *collectivism*, either *familism* or *communalism*. Societies differ in terms of whether their value system gives priority to individual autonomy and self-sufficiency or whether they give priority to the maintenance of social bonds with fellow-members of the family or the community.

American society, for example, is widely acclaimed as an extremely individualistic society (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton 1985; Williams 1957). Individual achievement or self-development is generally given higher priority than maintenance of close family ties or conformity to close-knit community norms and customs. This feature of our society

has been analyzed extensively almost from the beginning of the development of American sociology. Toennies well-known dichotomy of *Gemeinschaft* versus *Gesellschaft* has often been employed in this connection, and the gradual expansion of the individualistic *Gesellschaft*-type pattern into more and more areas of social life has been accepted as almost too obvious to require extensive elaboration.

In contrast, there are other societies that emphasize collectivist-type values rather than individualistic-type. They may give priority to the maintenance of family or community bonds or to the fulfillment of various obligations to other groups to which individuals belong or to the overall society itself. Individual needs, desires, and aspirations are generally subordinated to the welfare of the group. Even so, individuals may not necessarily feel highly repressed because the basic value system they have internalized does not emphasize individualistic-type goals.

The specific nature of the social bonds in collectivist-type societies will vary widely, of course. In so-called primitive or tribal societies, primary loyalty may be to the tribe. Societies made up of small isolated village communities may emphasize responsibilities to the community and the maintenance of community traditions. In many types of societies loyalty to the family, both nuclear and extended, is given priority over pursuit of individualistic goals. Latin American societies, for example, tend to emphasize family bonds much more strongly than the United States. Or, there may be a strong emphasis on identification with the society as a whole. Even in a complex society such as the Soviet Union, for example, the individual is generally expected to be subordinated to the state and the party and the ideology that they represent.

It should be emphasized that our distinction between individualistic versus collectivistic societies is a general and highly abstract distinction that ignores many crucial differences. As suggested above, for example, collectivistic-type societies may emphasize identification with the family, the community, or with the overall society. Moreover, there are important differences between "familism" or "communalism" in different societies. Identification with corporate groups in Japan, for example, is very different from identification with an Israeli kibbutz. Complex societies in particular provide many alternatives for individuals' identification. In some cases, identification with particular groups may be in opposition to the efforts of societal political elites to promote identification with the overall society. The situation of Jews in the Soviet Union is a case in point. Our goal in this paper, however, is to relate the *general* distinction between individualistic and collectivist values to personality formation, particularly needs for social contact and emotional bonding, and the experience of loneliness.

The differences between individualistic and collectivistic values are not absolute, of course. In the United States, for example, in spite of the high

level of individualism, there are still many people who are willing to sacrifice at least some of their individual goals and desires for the sake of their families. There are important subcultural differences in this regard. Moreover, the diversity of alternative family forms is so great that the traditional nuclear family, with father, mother, and children carrying out their traditional specialized roles, is actually in the minority today. Nevertheless, in many ethnic and subcultural groups, familistic-type values still have high priority (Berger and Berger 1983).

In addition, occupational groups, such as the professions for many people, provide another important source of identification for people in American society that perhaps helps to moderate the individualistic emphasis of the overall value system. For older people the experience of retirement results in the elimination of this source of social contact and emotional bonding. This probably helps explain the unanticipated experience of loneliness that older persons sometimes experience in spite of their continued contact with their family. The problem is exacerbated, of course, when family ties are also reduced.

By the same token, societies with a strong collectivist orientation (whether family-oriented, community-oriented, or society-oriented) also provide some opportunities for the expression of individualistic values or the pursuit of individualistic goals. Such pursuits may not be well institutionalized, or they may be regarded as somewhat devious, but they are tolerated. (Private profiteering in socialist countries might serve as an example of this pattern.) In simpler, small-scale societies (such as tribal societies or traditional village-based societies), however, the concept of individual needs or goals that contrast with the group may not even be developed. Instead, the value system is such that individual desires and goals are satisfied as individuals fulfill their obligations to the group. In return, individuals are able to enjoy all the material and emotional rewards that are based on their membership in the group.

Traditional, collectivist-type value systems typically undergo pressures for change when societies embark on the process of development through industrialization, urbanization, and related changes. Traditional customs and social formations may become inappropriate or irrelevant and new alternatives emerge, some of which may involve the gradual development of individualistic values that eventually erode the solidarity of traditional family and community life. This does not mean that developing societies will reach the level of individualism found in American society or Western industrial societies in general. The experience of Japan demonstrates that strong collectivist-type values and high social solidarity can be maintained with a high level of industrialization. Moreover, there are interesting variations in some industrial societies in which the obligations of the state to provide for the basic needs of all its citizens is given priority over both individualistic goals and obligations to the group or to society. Sweden and other democratic socialist societies illustrate this pattern.

## VALUE ORIENTATIONS AND RELATIVE SOCIAL DEPRIVATION

How do these differences in basic value orientations relate to older persons' experiences of loneliness in different types of society? The concept of a loneliness threshold that varies for different persons suggests that people differ in terms of their basic needs for social contact and emotional bonding. Further, in terms of the perspective in this paper, these differences reflect different types of basic cultural or subcultural value orientations. The experience of loneliness would result when the level of social contact is lower than desired in terms of a person's particular loneliness threshold.

However, this perspective leaves us with a puzzle. If, as noted earlier, basic value systems are reflected both in the dominant social formations of a society and in the basic personality structures of its members, how can we account for the discrepancy between people's needs for social contacts and emotional bonding and the opportunities available to satisfy these needs? If, for example, people have internalized individualistic values, why should a low level of social contacts be experienced as a deficit or lead to the emotional distress of loneliness? On the other hand, if collectivist values are institutionalized in a society, should this not mean that its social structure would provide ample opportunities for people to satisfy their socioemotional needs and thereby avoid feelings of loneliness?

Part of the answer to the puzzle is that societies are probably never so well integrated that there is always complete consistency between the overall value system of a society and all of its social formations, particularly in a complex society. What happens when individuals internalize collectivist values that encourage a high level of identification with their family or community, but there is inadequate opportunity to maintain the necessary social contacts for realizing these values? The result: subjective feelings of loneliness. On the other hand, what if individualistic values are so strong that persons feel "crowded" or overwhelmed by the responsibilities involved even with a minimal level of social relations? This would be the opposite experience of loneliness.

In short, people may find that their opportunities for satisfying social contacts are not consistent with the values they have internalized or their resulting socioemotional needs. When there is a deficit, the result is subjective feelings of loneliness. However, because of the variations between people in terms of their needs for social contact and emotional bonding, what is regarded as a deficit will not be the same for persons in different societies (or different segments of a particular society). Whether a given level of social contacts is adequate or inadequate will depend upon the relative priority given to individualistic versus collectivist values. As indicated above this assessment reflects the cultural or subcultural value system that individuals have internalized.

Persons with individualistic values should be less likely to experience

the emotional distress of loneliness, in spite of a relatively low level of social contacts, than those with more collectivistic values. After all, it would seem that their needs for social contacts would be lower than the needs of persons with collectivist-type values. Therefore, they should be satisfied with lower levels of social contact. Nevertheless, they may still experience loneliness if their actual level of social contacts drops even lower than the already low level that they need to avoid loneliness.

This could readily happen in individualistic societies because of the widespread belief that people should be self-sufficient and independent. In other words, their needs are relatively low, but, because of the high priority of individualistic values, even these low needs are left unsatisfied — or perhaps are not even explicitly acknowledged as appropriate. For example, older persons may actually deny their needs for social contact because they do not want to be a burden to their families.

There are perhaps two additional reasons why persons might experience loneliness even though their basic values are highly individualistic. First, in a complex society, people are exposed to numerous alternative value systems. Even though the dominant values may be highly individualistic, there may be subcultural patterns that individuals internalize that are more collectivist in nature than the dominant values. For example, the small-scale subcultures of most families will be less individualistic than the dominant values of the overall society. Although families themselves show considerable variation in this regard, there is certainly a widespread expectation that family members will experience a certain degree of socioemotional bonding. Thus familistic values persist even in individualistic societies — even though they may be sacrificed for the sake of individualistic values and goals.

Beyond this, individuals may participate in numerous groups — friendship groups, occupational groups, church groups, neighborhood groups, etc. — that emphasize collectivist-type values. In many situations these subcultural values will be given lower priority than the dominant individualistic values, but they nevertheless help to moderate the individualistic emphasis of the dominant culture.

A second type of explanation for the experience of loneliness in an individualistic society is based on the fundamental human need for some minimal level of socioemotional bonding with others. The extent to which this need is recognized and fulfilled will be heavily influenced by the cultural milieu. But because of the sociable nature of human beings, it seems safe to assume that there may well be some minimal level of social contact and emotional bonding that all human beings need, regardless of how individualistic and self-sufficient they may be. People cannot function as normal human beings in complete isolation from others; they need some minimal level of primary group involvement.

The other side of the coin should also be noted even though it is not

our concern in this paper. Nevertheless, it is interesting to raise the question of whether there might not also be some minimal level of individualism that human beings need to be able to experience and express, even though their primary value orientation is a collectivist one. While the degree of individualism may be very low, the existence of individual differences plus the challenge of individual survival would seem to imply that some minimal level of individuation is necessary in all societies, as well as some minimal level of socioemotional bonding.

It should be clear that we are dealing with the relative priorities of individualistic versus collectivist values, not with an "all or nothing" type of choice between these alternatives. Societies may give priority to individualistic values or to collectivist values, but they cannot eliminate either of them. Moreover, it is difficult if not impossible to give equal weight to both types of values. In many situations these values seem to be inconsistent with one another. If one side is given higher priority, the other will have to be given lower priority.

In a complex society, however, subcultural values may emerge (such as familistic or other collectivist values in an individualistic society) that emphasize the other side of the dilemma. The result is that individuals may experience conflict between the individualistic values of the wider society and the claims of their families or other primary groups. Similarly, in a "collectivist" type society, individuals may find ways (sometimes devious) to satisfy their individual needs or goals in opposition to the demands or claims of the wider society.

The cultural dilemma of individualism versus collectivism probably has its parallel at the psychological level. In general, individuals' priorities reflect the dominant cultural (or subcultural) value system that they have internalized. However, there may be discrepancies, as noted above, and individuals may find themselves without adequate opportunities to satisfy their socioemotional needs whatever their particular loneliness threshold might be.

The time factor is important in this regard. In situations where it is impossible to satisfy two inconsistent needs simultaneously, it is possible to shift priorities from time to time so that in the long run both are satisfied. This perspective can be applied both to the societal level and to the individual level. At the societal level there may be gradual shifts from higher to lower levels of individualism or collectivism. Individuals may not necessarily be conscious of long-term societal changes such as these, but they can be documented by historians who focus explicitly on such trends.

At the individual level, individuals may also shift back and forth between individualistic and collectivist values, both on a short-term and on a long-term basis. In the short term, for example, individuals may devote week-ends or vacations to their family or other primary groups, while their work week is devoted to their individualistic goals of occupa-

tional or financial success. In the long term, an upwardly mobile American who is just starting out in a career may decide to give priority to the goal of occupational and financial success, even when this means that family life may have to be sacrificed, with the expectation of being able to give priority to family or friends after success is achieved.

The range of options that are considered will vary in different societies or different segments of a complex society with a wide variety of sub-cultures. This means that a "familistic" choice made by persons in a highly individualistic society might seem to be even more individualistic than an "individualistic" choice in a more familistic society. For example, a geographically mobile middle-class American family may shift toward familistic values in their decision to take a family vacation, but, if this choice does not include visits with distant extended family members, it might appear very individualistic to those who place greater value on extended family contacts. By the same token a person who identifies strongly with their religious group may express their individualism by providing some outstanding service to their group, while more individualistic persons would regard this as a clear indication of a collectivist-type commitment. Such evaluations reflect the range that is considered realistic within the context of a particular society's value system.

The differences between these alternative value systems are relative, not absolute. Presumably no human being would be satisfied if all primary group relationships were completely eliminated for extremely long periods of time, regardless of how individualistic their society might be. Similarly, no human being would be satisfied if they could not be recognized as distinct individuals with their own identities and their own names, regardless of how strongly their value system emphasizes their primary group involvements. Because of these basic human needs for both socioemotional bonding and individuation, no society could completely ignore either of these somewhat inconsistent needs. That is, whether the value system stresses individualistic or collectivistic values, there will probably have to be some tolerance for the opposite values as well, even though at a lower level of priority.

Nevertheless, the range of options that are considered plausible and normal will reflect the overall value system of the society. Individuals who thoroughly internalize the value orientations of their society may be unaware of the possibility of giving priority to a radically different value system. For example, many middle class Americans generally accept without question the notion that individuals should pursue their own individual goals of occupational success, even when this means that family life may have to be sacrificed somewhat as a result. The idea that adults should sacrifice career success by limiting their mobility so they can live near their parents is generally regarded as too much to ask. In contrast, in more familistic-type societies, individuals may restrict their mobility so as to avoid disruption of family ties.

It is important to stress that individuals' basic personality development will also reflect the priorities of the surrounding culture (or subculture). That is, the psychological or emotional needs for social bonds are actually less for those who internalize an individualistic value system. Such persons are highly self-reliant and, in the absence of opportunities to interact with others, they are able to draw upon their own personal psychological and emotional resources to satisfy their various needs. They may even enjoy their own company so much that they actually prefer being alone for large blocks of time instead of being surrounded by others. In contrast, a person with a more familistic or communal value system may suffer acute emotional distress and extreme loneliness when faced with the need to spend similar blocks of time alone.

There are numerous variations within societies as well as between them. A given level of primary group involvement (family, friends, or community relationships) may be satisfactory for some persons, deficient for others, and excessive for still others within the same society. This is due to subcultural differences within society. Nevertheless, the range of subcultural differences would typically be less *within* a society than the range *between* societies.

These subcultural differences may even be reflected within individuals' personality structures, as a result of which individuals actually internalize inconsistent values or experience ambivalence regarding their needs for socioemotional bonding versus individuation. As suggested above, they may shift over time from one side to the other. However, an excessively strong emphasis on either the individualistic side or the collectivist side may result in the accumulation of deficits on the other side. This means, for example, that in American society there may be a psychological or emotional price to pay for the heavy emphasis on individualism.

#### SOCIAL BONDING VERSUS INDIVIDUATION AND THE LONELINESS THRESHOLD

Thus far the emphasis has been on the way in which individuals' needs for being with others or for being alone reflect the dominant values of their society or of particular subcultures within it. The concept of the loneliness threshold was introduced to refer to the minimal level of social contact and emotional bonding that is necessary to prevent chronic feelings of loneliness. To explain the subjective experience of loneliness, it is necessary to look at the discrepancy between the level of social contacts that individuals have learned to expect and desire and the level currently available.

In terms of this perspective the loneliness threshold varies for persons with different value systems in different types of society (or in different segments of a given society that have contrasting subcultures). However, it

was also suggested that all human beings need some minimal level of primary group involvement plus some minimal level of individuation and that, because of these basic human needs, no society is completely consistent in terms of emphasizing either individualistic or collectivistic values to the exclusion of the other.

What are the basic parameters of human nature in this regard? For instance, what is the minimum level of emotional bonding or social involvement below which individuals experience acute or chronic feelings of loneliness? Similarly, is there some maximum level of identification with the group above which individual ego development is pathologically attenuated? These hypothetical questions are beyond the scope of this paper. It is probably impossible ever to determine what these needs are in their "natural" state without being influenced by the culture and social environment.

Nevertheless, if individuals' personality patterns do reflect the cultural or subcultural emphasis placed on socioemotional bonding versus individuation, we should certainly be able to predict that the loneliness threshold will differ for people in different societies. Determining what this threshold is for different persons in different societies becomes essentially an empirical question; it certainly cannot be answered on an *a priori* or purely theoretical basis. To demonstrate the need for comparative empirical research in this area, let us consider two opposing culture-and-personality models that can be developed for each of the two types of value systems described above.

If we analyze the implications of the value system of a highly individualistic society, such as the United States, for example, it could be argued, on the one hand, that because of the strong emphasis given to individualistic values, individuals' needs for primary group bonds would be relatively lower than in a more collectivist society. That is, the personality structure of such persons would be relatively self-reliant, not in need of constant or extensive involvement in primary groups of any type. Such persons would find satisfaction in individual pursuits and in spending time alone. Their level of primary group involvement (with family and friends, for example) would have to be extremely low before they begin to experience the psychological discomfort of emotional isolation. For older persons who find themselves living alone, subjective feelings of loneliness should be less frequent or less serious than if they had internalized the opposing value system.

On the other hand, it could be argued that persons whose values lead them to pursue individualistic goals all their lives would gradually build up emotional deficits which they fail to recognize or deal with until they reach old age, at which point it may not be possible for such life-long deficiencies to be resolved. The tragic figure of the American superachiever who does not take the time to maintain meaningful relationships with family

and friends and who eventually faces old age alone and without the deep emotional satisfaction of close and enduring primary group relationships would fit this pattern. With retirement the opportunity to continue pursuing individual goals is drastically curtailed, and the social deficits can no longer be ignored. Such persons may have to struggle with the painful realization that they had somehow missed out on the most important things in life.

This latter model suggests that there may be a basic human need for some minimal level of primary group emotional bonding which, if not satisfied, results in the gradual long-term accumulation of socioemotional deficits. The tragedy is that if these deficits are repressed or postponed for too long, a person may reach the point where they can never be satisfied. Such a person's basic personality structure leaves them without the social skills or the opportunities for establishing deeply satisfying emotional bonds. Even when such persons are not *physically* isolated from others, their basic character structure leaves them *emotionally* isolated.

In contrast, let us now consider the problem of loneliness in a society with strong collective values. In accordance with the basic principle that personality structures reflect cultural values, an emphasis on familistic or communal bonds should result in a high *need* for such primary group affiliation. Such persons would find intolerable a level of social isolation that persons in individualistic-type societies might welcome from time to time. In the absence of the opportunity for continuous or frequent involvement in a surrounding circle of family, friends, or fellow-members of a close-knit community for any length of time, persons with strong collectivist values would quickly experience loneliness and emotional isolation. In contrast to those with individualistic values, the loneliness threshold of such persons would be low. That is, they need much more extensive primary group involvement to avoid the painful experience of emotional isolation. The implication for older persons living alone is that the problem of loneliness would be extensive. However, we should expect that, because of the strong collectivist value system of the society itself, there should be relatively fewer older persons who live alone than in more individualistic societies. After all, the older person's family, community, and various primary groups would all reflect the strong emphasis on maintaining high levels of mutual involvement.

On the other hand, it could be argued that older persons in collectivist societies who somehow do find that they must live alone would not have to deal with the accumulation of socioemotional deficits that could result from consistently giving priority to individualistic goals. Instead, their basic socioemotional needs would have been highly satisfied for most of their lives. Even if they should lose most of their primary group relationships as they advance in age, the lifetime of memories would provide a personal psychological resource which helps to ward off

emotional isolation and the acute pain of loneliness. This is evident for persons with a long history of involvement in a close-knit family even in highly individualistic societies. Conversations with older persons in American society, for example, who have a rich store of a life-time of memories of enjoyable relationships and activities with family and friends (often accompanied by photographs and other mementoes) can readily reveal what an important psychological and emotional resource this is for persons living alone.

Consideration of these alternatives suggests the need for more empirical investigation into the social relationships and socioemotional feelings of older persons in different types of societies with different types of basic value orientations. Does a strong emphasis on familistic or communal bonds inhibit the development of feelings of loneliness? Or do such values create such a high level of socioemotional needs that acute loneliness is virtually inevitable at some point in life, especially in old age as roles change, health perhaps declines, and family members and friends begin to die off? Similarly, does a strong emphasis on individualistic values result in such high repression of basic socioemotional needs that acute loneliness is eventually inevitable, especially in old age when the opportunity to pursue individual goals is typically curtailed greatly? Or, do such values reduce the need for socioemotional bonding to the point where being alone is not experienced as psychologically or emotionally distressing? These questions suggest the need for well-designed research that looks at the relationship between socioemotional needs and feelings of loneliness against the background of the cultural and subcultural environment.

The focus in this paper on basic value systems and personality patterns is, of course, only one part of the overall picture of the psychological or emotional situation of older persons in different types of society. There are many other variables that are of equal importance. Moreover, the focus on values is admittedly problematic because value systems, at the level of discussion here, are extremely abstract, elusive, and difficult to measure satisfactorily, especially the general value systems of entire societies. Furthermore, efforts such as this to develop a comparative perspective involve the risk of cultural bias. In particular, it is extremely difficult to have a thorough understanding, at the level of ordinary people's everyday life worlds, of value systems that are radically different from one's own. Nevertheless, an adequate comparative analysis demands that the effort be made.

#### DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In addition to the focus on cultural value orientations, it is also essential to examine several more objective variables as they affect the older person's

experience of loneliness. One variable that is obviously important is the level of opportunity for older persons to maintain satisfying social relations with others. As noted earlier, whether a given level of social contacts is satisfying or not will depend upon the person's loneliness threshold. If the level of social contacts falls below the minimum level needed or desired the result is loneliness. This is true regardless of whether the level of need is high or low. The crucial question is whether the actual social contacts are higher or lower than the contacts needed or desired.

Opportunities for contacts are themselves related to the actual living arrangements of older persons. These arrangements, in turn, are no doubt related to several additional variables, including, for example, family and marital status (especially whether or not the older person is living with a spouse), socioeconomic status, and health. Socioeconomic status and health could conceivably have direct effects on the loneliness threshold, in addition to their effects on opportunities for social contacts. For example, serious deficits in economic resources or especially in health may depress the effects of social deficits. This would imply that economic survival needs and physical health needs are more basic than socioemotional needs. The result is that older persons may experience more distress or anxiety regarding these deficits than their social deficits. Of course, empirical research is needed to establish the rank order of importance of various deficiencies that older persons may experience.

The living arrangements of older persons can conveniently be classified on the basis of whether they continue to live in the same community in which they had lived during the "working years" of their adult lives or whether they relocate to some type of age-segregated housing, such as retirement communities, nursing homes, etc. (Brody, Kleban and Liebowitz 1975; Bronson 1972; Fishbein 1975; Harel and Harel 1978; Retsinas and Garrity 1985; Schwartz 1975; Sherman 1975a; 1975b; Stephens and Bernstein 1984). Age-segregated living arrangements for older persons often provide new opportunities for social contacts. However, they may sometimes separate older persons from their family and long-term friends, and some older persons may experience difficulty in making new friends, especially if their health is declining. On the other hand, maintaining residence in an age-integrated community is no guarantee that the frequency or the quality of contacts with family or long-term friends will be sufficient to satisfy the older person's socioemotional needs. Moreover, in individualistic societies, it is often the older person's family members who move away, especially adult offspring, leaving elderly persons relatively isolated from their family. Clearly, more research is needed to explore the complex relationship between living arrangements, opportunities for social contact, socioemotional needs, and the experience of loneliness.

In considering these questions it should also be pointed out that older

persons' living arrangements are not independent of the overall cultural (or subcultural) value system. We might expect, for example, that societies with a strong familistic-type value system would be more likely to have living arrangements in which elderly persons live close to their families and maintain extensive contact with them.

In addition to the level of individuals' socioemotional needs and the loneliness threshold, there are probably several other personality variables that have an effect on a person's level of social contacts and subjective evaluation of them as adequate or inadequate (Harris and Associates 1981). Nevertheless, for developing a comparative cross-cultural perspective, analyzing variations in basic cultural or subcultural value orientations as individualistic or collectivistic is an important foundation for helping us understand differences between people in terms of their socioemotional needs and the experience of loneliness when there are deficits in this regard.

The discussion in this paper has identified a number of complex but interrelated issues at both the macro and the micro levels. As a guide for research and analysis some of the major specific questions that this major analysis suggests are as follows:

(1) How are individuals' levels of need for social contact and emotional bonding with others affected by the overall value system of society or the subcultural values of their particular segment of society? Specifically, can the relative emphasis on individualism versus some form of collectivism in the general value orientations of society be related to basic personality differences in individuals' level of need for socioemotional bonding? And, to what extent do subcultures in a complex society compensate for a one-sided emphasis in the dominant culture?

(2) What are the effects of life-long patterns of social bonding on the socioemotional bonding needs of older persons? Specifically, if individuals have pursued individualistic goals for most of their lives, does this lead to the accumulation of deficits that they must face in old age? Or, are their needs for social bonding less than those with an opposing value orientation? On the other hand, if individuals' needs for social bonding have been fulfilled throughout their lives, does this increase or decrease their social bonding needs in their old age?

(3) What is the relationship between the living arrangements of older persons and the quantity and quality of contacts that they are able to maintain with family and friends? If there are deficits in their relations with family and long-term friends, are they able to compensate with new social relations? To what extent do older persons' abilities to form new social bonds depend on their basic personality structure? And how are they influenced by other variables such as health, mobility, and financial resources?

(4) What effect does the overall value system of society have on the

living arrangements and general social policies that are adopted for the elderly? Are there differences between societies in their preference for age-segregated versus age-integrated housing? And, what is the effect of these living arrangements on the experience of loneliness or the loneliness threshold.

The concept of the *loneliness threshold* is crucial in helping us understand why older individuals differ in terms of their need for social bonding. The model proposed here suggests that this variable is influenced by (1) the overall cultural (or subcultural) value system and by (2) previous levels of social bonding in earlier stages of life. (These two variables are also related.) Moreover, this concept can help us understand why the subjective experience of loneliness or emotional isolation is not necessarily directly related to the objective experience of being alone.

Exploring issues such as these will allow us to go beyond our current levels of knowledge regarding the problem of loneliness among older persons. The model suggested in this paper will enable us to extend our analysis beyond the personality structure or other individual-level variables in trying to understand the problem of loneliness. Specifically, the model proposed here is designed to serve as a preliminary framework for comparative analysis. It should also allow us to investigate more systematically the relationship between the objective condition of being alone and the subjective experience of loneliness and emotional isolation.

#### NOTE

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