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COMMUNICATION, LONELINESS AND INTIMACY

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By
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The Ohio State University
1997

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1997
Definitions of intimacy imply that to feel lonely within an intimate relationship is inappropriate. This research begins with the assumption that to feel loneliness within intimate relationships is possible and does not necessarily reflect a lack in the relationship or in the individual's social or communication skills.

This project examined loneliness within intimate relationships. Two research questions guided the study: What meaning do individuals attribute to a feeling of loneliness if they feel it within the context of what they perceive to be an intimate relationship that is healthy and strong? How does communicating with one's partner (or choosing not to communicate) about this feeling affect the intimate relationship?

The method was centered in grounded theory and involved analytic induction of in-depth qualitative interviews with 29 individuals in 19 different relationships who perceive themselves to be in good, committed, romantic relationships. Each interview entailed open-ended questions on participants' ideas about their intimate relationships, loneliness in general, and loneliness within their intimate relationships.

Based on analysis of the themes developed from the interviews, a theory of relational loneliness was derived in an effort to provide explanations for and coherency to the experience of loneliness in
relationship. The theory suggests that people have expectations about relationships, constructed in large part by social and cultural influences, which inevitably are violated. When people recognize the inconsistencies between their lived relationship and the cultural ideal, they feel what they call loneliness, which is experienced differently from general loneliness. One of three options are chosen as a response to this loneliness—an attempted denial of the feeling of loneliness, a continuing struggle to make sense of the experience, and an acceptance of the experience as a growth experience.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to the 29 people who participated in this research for the generous gift of your experiences and insights. Thanks to my committee members, Patrick McKenry and Virginia Richardson, and to Mary Garrett, for your support throughout this process. Thanks to the Graduate School of The Ohio State University for helping to sponsor this research with funds from the Graduate Student Alumni Research Award. Thanks to special friends, especially Debian, Jim, Ted, Pam, Laura, and Ashwini. Special thanks to Sonja Foss for endless creative energy and for believing in me.
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It is clear that we face the last quarter of the 20th century afraid of loneliness. 
Dorothy Meyer Gaev, 1976

Americans dread admitting a feeling of loneliness. In the U.S., we have strong cultural biases against the lonely—we judge them as misfits, losers, loners. Acknowledging this bias, many scholars have noted that loneliness is difficult to study because of the stigma attached to it and the assumption that scholars who study loneliness are doing so because of their own deep, psychological pain (e.g., Perlman & Peplau, 1982; Weiss, 1982). Few Americans—and few academic scholars—want to be associated with loneliness and with the lonely.

Even as loneliness is stigmatized and avoided, the experience and expression of loneliness are prevalent in American culture and need to be theorized in all of its complexity. Although few would choose to be publicly labeled as lonely, discussions of loneliness as a human condition are prevalent in most forms of media, including popular literature and magazines and self-help literature. A broad review of the treatment of loneliness within popular culture grounds this study in real-world experience
and illuminates both the stigma attached to loneliness and the competing desire to express somehow the stigmatized feeling.

In entertainment media, loneliness alternately is used as a way to portray a character with whom the audience is supposed to sympathize or toward whom the audience is supposed to feel disdain. Television sitcoms, in particular, toy with the experience of loneliness and portray "lonely people" in ways that undermine the potential power of loneliness. Sometimes a character--like that played by Matthew Perry in the popular sitcom Friends--simply cannot find a romantic partner. His loneliness is comic, partly because we believe he will find someone eventually. His loneliness is not pathetic--or even touching--because it is not believable. Another popular sitcom, The Single Guy, is predicated on loneliness as a driving force for many of the main character's actions. Rarely, however, does the loneliness that is implied ever get full treatment on its own. We see this character pace and lament being alone, but we also see this character enjoying a string of dates every other week. These are not typically lonely characters or situations, again, because the loneliness is not presented as real.

Perhaps actual loneliness is not fully considered in many television programs because feeling lonely is not dramatic. In soap operas and television programs, loneliness is portrayed as the reason that people chase connection; the loneliness is alluded to, but the real drama is in the chase. Loneliness is the reason for action (sleeping around, chasing a potential lover, binging on food, sitting lifelessly in front of the TV), but it is never the focus or action in itself. We do not allow loneliness to exist on its own but instead focus on negative reactions to it. In this negative focus, or virtual silencing, we do not acknowledge or respect the feeling of loneliness.
Loneliness in self-help literature differs from that portrayed in the electronic mass media because it explicitly suggests the existence of a problem that needs to be solved. Self-help books suggest loneliness is a problem to be corrected, and rather than take a descriptive approach, self-help advice is built around "curing" the "disease" of loneliness and ridding ourselves of our self-destructive attitudes that ostensibly lead to lonely living. Many self-help books say that loneliness is due to some personality characteristic of the lonely person. With determination and the price of a paperback book, lonely people can learn to recognize their own mistakes and change their own behavior and attitudes. Burns (1985), for example, dedicated his self-help book to lonely, shy people, with the hopes "that reading it will help you love and appreciate yourself and in the process learn to get closer to others" (p. v). He thereby equates loneliness with the inadequacies of those who feel lonely; they are lonely due to their own low self-esteem and their own feelings of "shyness, inferiority, and sexual insecurity" (p. 7). If only the lonely would learn to love themselves, then they would "discover that other people will love [them] too, and [their] loneliness will only be a memory" (p. 6). Buy this self-help book, is the implicit (or explicit) refrain, and you, too, can find a partner with whom to share your life and love.

Certainly, general notions of loneliness suggest a lonely person wants nothing more than an intimate relationship. Weiss (1982) asserts that "loneliness is allayed only by a relationship in which there is assurance of the continued accessibility of someone trusted" (p. 77). But what if the lonely person already is in a good relationship? American definitions of intimacy imply that to feel lonely within an intimate relationship is inappropriate and suggests something is wrong with the relationship. The idea of
simultaneously feeling connected with others and yet lonely seems inherently paradoxical. If we are connected to another, if what we share with another person is truly intimacy, then how can we feel lonely? What if, in an intimate connection that an individual perceives to be healthy and strong, an individual feels something in the relationship that is not defined as part of intimacy? What does it mean if that individual feels something akin to loneliness? Can a person who is in a good intimate relationship feel lonely? Does feeling lonely suggest the relationship is lacking or that a person has exaggerated expectations of the relationship? Does it mean "real" intimacy has not been achieved? Is feeling lonely connected with a person's tendency to feel disdain and to shut others out? I suggest that to feel loneliness within intimate relationships is possible and that the feeling may be positive or at least not harm the relationship. I believe that something like loneliness can exist inside intimacy—perhaps in the space balancing autonomy and connection, in the space balancing togetherness and aloneness—that does not necessarily reflect a lack in the relationship or in any individual's social or communication skills.

In sum, more than 100 million Americans have reported feeling lonely at some point in their lives (Burns, 1985). Loneliness can be about unmet expectations but need not always be so; it can be about negativity and disdain for others but need not always be so; it can be about simply not having compatible people with whom to connect but need not always be so. We cannot sum up all that is loneliness and attribute it to one cause, to one personality type, to one situation. One way to begin to understand loneliness in its complexity is by examining it within healthy, intimate relationships.
Research Questions

Two general research questions guided this research project. The first question provided the major focus of the study: What meanings do individuals attribute to a feeling of loneliness if they feel it within the context of what they perceive to be an intimate relationship that is healthy and strong? Numerous questions were raised earlier about what kinds of boundaries we build for "inappropriate" emotions within relationships and how we come to reconcile dissonance about feelings we think we should not be having given our beliefs about our intimate relationship. The first research question examines relational loneliness from participants' own viewpoints.

The first question implicitly suggests that a feeling of loneliness might affect a good intimate relationship; the second research question follows that reasoning with a communication focus: What is the relationship between feelings of loneliness and communication with one's intimate partner? Because various aspects of communication, especially self-disclosure, are often implicitly or explicitly linked to relationship satisfaction, especially marital satisfaction (e.g., Dickson-Markman, 1984; Merves-Okin, Amidon, & Bernt, 1991; Schmidt & Cornelius, 1987), the communication link to loneliness—via intimacy—is critical. An examination of both of these questions allowed me to develop a theory of relational loneliness and how responses to it might affect socially accepted notions of intimacy.

Literature Review

The literature review consists of two sections. In the first section, I address three broad categories of loneliness typologies; in the second section, I
describe specific problems with the literature on loneliness that I addressed in the design and execution of this study.

**Loneliness Typologies**

Loneliness typologies are general frameworks or schemata for approaching the study of loneliness. Although various authors posit the existence of numerous typologies, I have chosen to address three of the most prominent typologies. They are emotional vs. social isolation, state vs. trait definitions, and existential and pathological loneliness.

**Emotional vs. Social Isolation**

When addressed in its multidimensionality, loneliness predominantly is discussed in all fields in terms Robert Weiss introduced in 1973, that is, as pertaining to the experiences of emotional isolation and social isolation.

**Emotional isolation.** Weiss (1973) introduced the concept of emotional isolation as "a form of loneliness that appears in the absence of a close emotional attachment . . . [that] can only be remedied by the integration of another emotional attachment or the reintegration of the one that had been lost" (pp. 18-19). Emotional isolation is not necessarily felt by everyone who lacks intimate relationships; the feeling of emotional isolation is a subjective response to a perceived lack of intimacy, a response that often is manifest by a "sense of utter aloneness" (p. 21).

Weiss emphasizes that emotional isolation usually refers to the absence of a generalized attachment figure and not to the absence of a particular person. Other scholars since have argued that emotional longing for a particular person certainly qualifies as emotional isolation. For instance, the loneliness felt when a spouse dies or when two people divorce is akin to
the feeling of emotional isolation even though the target of that isolation is specific and known.

Social isolation. While emotional isolation is associated with a lack of intimate relationships, social isolation is associated with a lack of community ties (Perlman & Joshi, 1989). Social isolation is the kind of loneliness produced by the "absence of an engaging social network" (Weiss, 1973, p. 19), a network and community that are accessible to the lonely person (Weiss, 1982). Persons feeling the loneliness of social isolation are apt to feel bored or aimless. Weiss has suggested that he was "less confident" about his conception of social isolation than he was about emotional isolation (as cited in Paloutzian & Janigian, 1989, p. 33). He and others have suggested that perhaps more research is needed to understand if social isolation truly is an experience related to the absence of community.

Even given his own reservations, Weiss's typology of loneliness is by far the most influential work in the loneliness literature (de Jong-Gierveld & Raadschelders, 1982; Peplau & Perlman, 1982a). Perlman (1989) indicated that Weiss's distinction between the loneliness of emotional and social isolation has dominated the study of loneliness. Weiss himself commented in 1989 that we seem to have stopped searching for new ways to understand loneliness; we do not know much more about loneliness than when he first proposed a distinction between emotional and social isolation 16 years earlier (Weiss, 1989, p. 6). The ideas behind the distinctions between emotional and social isolation are the cornerstone of loneliness research, and scholars have adopted Weiss's definitions with remarkably little disagreement.
State vs. Trait Definitions

Weiss's distinctions have been the most influential, but there is research on loneliness derived from other perspectives. One, the state-vs.-trait focus, primarily is concerned with temporal elements of loneliness. In this perspective, a distinction is drawn between temporary loneliness due to situational factors or states and permanent loneliness due to enduring personality traits. These two kinds of loneliness are sometimes called transitory and chronic loneliness (Bell & Daly, 1985) or temporary and chronic loneliness (Perlman, 1989).

Loneliness as a state. State loneliness is momentary and "probably results from immediate interpersonal deficits in a given situation" (Jones, 1989, p. 28). This type of definition is assumed by those who study loneliness in, for example, the new life situations of people who recently have moved or have been hospitalized (Weiss, 1982). Researchers who take into account a temporal perspective are interested in how loneliness is considered by some to be a temporary condition that will pass. Most researchers assume that most—if not all—people sometimes will feel transitory loneliness.

Loneliness as a trait. Trait loneliness, on the other hand, is considered to be an enduring personality characteristic and often is studied with attention paid to low self-esteem, introversion, shyness (Weiss, 1982, p. 75), or general hostility toward others (as cited in Duck, Pond & Leatham, 1994). Jones (1989) suggests that trait loneliness is the result of consistent "failure" in interpersonal relationships and suggests that those "failures" perhaps begin with the family of origin. Researchers interested in these types of distinctions consider important the fact that many people speak of their loneliness as something permanent, an enduring aspect of their lives.
Existential and Pathological Loneliness

Gaev's approach to loneliness is more global than the other typologies offered and, in asking broader questions, she is able to clarify how the experience of loneliness can affect everyone. Gaev (1976) writes about what she calls existential loneliness and pathological loneliness. Existential loneliness suggests an experience inherently common to human beings. It is the kind of loneliness that ostensibly every human being feels by nature of being human. Gaev's description suggests less of a cultural explanation for existential loneliness than a physical, almost biological, explanation related to the fact of being and growing and living and dying. What she calls pathological loneliness refers to the feeling of loneliness that is debilitating. When a sense of loneliness does not fade and starts to affect a person's ability to enter into or maintain relationships, that person may be experiencing a more focused and potentially personally harmful kind of loneliness.

Gaev differentiates five specific kinds of loneliness that can exist in either existential or pathological loneliness. Loneliness of the inner self refers to the sense of feeling disconnected from ourselves, even of feeling alienated or distant from ourselves. Physical loneliness refers to a sense of physical isolation when our needs for contact and touch are not met. Emotional loneliness is the feeling of needing more emotional intimacy and is similar to Weiss's emotional isolation. Social loneliness refers to feelings surrounding our need to belong; it refers to feeling the lack of a role in society or of having any place in a community and is similar in that sense to Weiss's social isolation. Finally, spiritual loneliness is the feeling of having a life that is empty, without meaning or purpose.
Problems and Issues in Loneliness Research

Loneliness has been addressed as a problem in such fields as clinical, developmental, personality and social psychology; family therapy; sociology; social work; gerontology; and psychiatry. Only recently, however, has loneliness begun to receive attention from interpersonal communication scholars (e.g., Bell, 1985; Bell & Roloff, 1991). While the previous section served to introduce broad typologies of loneliness, this section functions as both review and critique; it is structured with nine subsections of what I view as problematic issues facing scholars who seek to use the existing literature in studies of relational communication. These ten problems are: 1) loneliness is studied as a strictly personal phenomenon without regard to the broader social context; 2) loneliness is assumed to be the result of a deficiency in social skills; 3) loneliness is studied as a unidimensional concept; 4) existing studies use primarily one method and one scale; 5) loneliness is assumed to be negative; 6) existing studies focus on negative outcomes of loneliness for relationships; 7) women and men are assumed to experience loneliness in the same way; 8) mostly college students are studied; and 9) loneliness is studied apart from relationships.

1) Studied as a Personal Phenomenon

An assumption that undergirds the majority of research on loneliness is that loneliness is a personal phenomenon or a micro-construct; the larger social and cultural context in which loneliness occurs is not considered (e.g., Bell & Roloff, 1991; Zakahi & Duran, 1982). One way loneliness is separated out from a larger context is in the emphasis on studying the chronically and tragically lonely. Most researchers say that many—if not all—people experience loneliness: they go on, however, only to study the most chronically affected
and rarely implicate themselves in their own research. "Loneliness is
something we all feel, to some extent," they say, but then the focus goes
toward those debilitated by loneliness, and the blame is securely fixed on the
lack of social skills evidenced by the severely lonely. Their research is about
individual others, not about all of us.

Most of the work on loneliness focuses only on the micro-level of
experienced loneliness; most research deals with the individual and perhaps
the individual's family and social network. This emphasis often makes
sense, given the backgrounds and the goals of those most likely to research
loneliness (i.e., counselors and psychologists). However, we might better
understand the lived experience of loneliness in one individual if we step
back and attempt to see broader effects of loneliness in society and the effects
of societal structures on the feeling of loneliness.

A few rare scholars with broader visions have connected the personal
feeling of loneliness to other larger realms; I focus on them here to show the
possibilities that could exist in the literature. Stephen (1992) and Slater (1990),
for example, correlate the experience of intimacy in the Western world to
changes in institutional factors and practices, suggesting that the business of
technology and industry cannot be separated from the realm of relating.
Moustakas (1961), in turn, suggests that modern ways of living consist of
behaviors enacted from a fear of loneliness or what he calls loneliness
anxiety. He relates modern life to

insidious fears of loneliness [that] exist everywhere, nourished and fed
by a sense of values and standards, by a way of life, which centers on
acquisition and control. The emphasis on conformity, following
directions, imitation, being like others, striving for power and status,
increasingly alienates man from himself. The search for safety, order,
and lack of anxiety through prediction and mastery eventually arouses
inward feelings of despair and fears of loneliness. Unable to experience life in a genuine way, unable to relate authentically to his own nature and to other selves, the individual in Western culture often suffers from a dread of nothingness. (p. 24)

Moustakas clearly links the experience of loneliness to something larger than the self. He introduces the idea of an existential loneliness, an experience of loneliness that pervades human existence.

Gaev's (1976) work also clearly shows the possibility of addressing loneliness in a way that connects that experience to a broader social realm—and in that connection, the tendency to blame is reduced. Gaev's book is one of the most compelling and compassionate works I have read, and it addresses many potentialities for experiencing loneliness. Gaev's evidence for claims about loneliness includes historical examples as well as personal stories and clinical case studies. Until I read this work and saw clearly in it the author's respect for human beings (even the lonely ones!) and seeming respect for the experience of loneliness itself, I had not realized how sterile most of the other research is, how removed it is from a broader vision of human life, and how dispassionate it is toward people who feel lonely. Her book and Moustakas's (1961) book are among the very few published works that stress our responsibility to others and the importance of having a meaningful place in the world. Within that focus is an underlying assumption of interdependence: "If we allow others to be treated as outcasts," Gaev (1976) writes, "we help to set up the kind of loneliness that we ourselves might face some day. Each of us can help to reduce the atmosphere of social loneliness by becoming sensitive to the need of every person to belong" (p. 128).
Loneliness certainly can and should be studied as a personal experience. However, loneliness is not only an individual phenomenon, and the broader social context must be addressed in order to understand more fully the loneliness that occurs on a micro-level. The kind of effort Gaev and Moustakas evidence in their scholarly work—the thoughtful connection of loneliness to art, politics, societal institutions, literature, sex roles, and their own lives—is important and offers a much-needed balance to the individual focus that pervades the literature on loneliness.

The lack of attention paid to cultural aspects of individuals' attitudes toward intimacy and loneliness also are present in the erasure of social identities. Just as biological sex or psychological gender may affect our experiences of loneliness, so, undoubtedly, do our race and class and other personal and social positions. I have discovered only two studies that deal directly with social identity and the experience of loneliness (e.g., Kiefer, 1980; Sundberg, 1988) and a rare few studies that mention potential connections. Cutrona (1982), for example, observes that Chicano students report somewhat greater loneliness than students of other ethnicities, and Weiss (1982) reports a "perplexing" association between loneliness and income level—the poor seem to be more lonely (p. 77). Loneliness probably is experienced differently if individuals are raised in a connected environment with strong kinship ties and with physical access to a large family network than an environment in which individuals are left more or less on their own. Although the experience of loneliness cannot be the same for every person, depending on cultural factors, current research on loneliness assumes homogeneity of context and fails to problematize it.
2) Assumed Deficiency in Social Skills

Studies of loneliness tend to focus on causes of loneliness in individuals’ skills and thus imply a deficit of some kind in lonely persons. Many communication scholars who study loneliness study it in relation to some other communication skill (or perceived lack thereof). Bell and his colleagues (Bell, 1985; Bell & Daly, 1985; Bell & Gonzalez, 1988; Bell & Roloff, 1991; Reinking & Bell, 1991), for example, consistently emphasize that people experience loneliness because they lack social skills. Because loneliness scales are strongly correlated with deficits in guidance, attachment, reassurance of worth, and other relational provisions (Bell & Gonzalez, 1988), loneliness is said to be a result of poor social skills.

Still other studies suggest that loneliness is a longing for connection and that the absence of connection is related to loneliness because of poor communication skills (Bell, 1985; Bell & Daly, 1985; Solano & Koester, 1989). Bell and Roloff (1991) found that lonely people cannot seem to behave in the rough and tumble "marketplace" of the social world as others do; they do not successfully advertise themselves to great effect nor are they as willing to compete with others for a relationship. Reinking and Bell's (1991) study of a state government agency supported the claim that loneliness is inversely related to communication competence. All of this work implies, therefore, that in some way the lonely people themselves are to blame for their loneliness. Their particular deficit is the key to their loneliness.

Solano and Koester (1989) highlight the fact that researchers generally have assumed that lonely people suffer from poor social skills and have assessed individuals' anxiety over their assumed lack of communication skills without actually accounting for the lack. Someone who self-selects as
lonely will be assumed to manifest that loneliness in their social skills. Other researchers, such as Bell (1985) and Bell and Daly (1985), did back up their assumptions in their research by correlating loneliness with poor communication and anxiety associated with those poor communication skills. I am not, in this critique, suggesting that loneliness is never associated with or cannot occur because of poor communication skills; rather, I am suggesting that loneliness need not always be associated with poor communication.

3) Studied as a Unidimensional Concept

Because loneliness often is addressed as a unidimensional concept, research studies deal largely with only one kind of loneliness and do not tend to differentiate among kinds of loneliness such as emotional or social isolation. Considering loneliness to be unidimensional means that loneliness is presented as one discrete experience that differs from person to person only in the degree to which it is felt (Russell, 1982). Some loneliness scales, for instance, only assess particular behaviors and beliefs that the scale designers predetermined to be indicative of one way of feeling loneliness. The scale simply charts the degree of loneliness felt—it cannot account for or even suggest other ways of enacting loneliness.

Considering loneliness to be a unidimensional concept was more obviously prevalent in the early stages of exploratory research, but even now, most scholars (e.g., authors of 80% of the published studies on loneliness) implicitly suggest loneliness is but a single phenomenon. Most scholars who study loneliness take for granted that loneliness can be of several distinct types (de Jong-Gierveld & Raadschelders, 1982), and this multidimensional approach to loneliness ostensibly is common. Even though most current
scholars now say that loneliness can be of several different types, however, their research is dominated heavily by the measurement of only one type of loneliness (see #4 below). Although they give lip service, then, to the multidimensionality of loneliness, researchers rarely enact this multidimensionality in their research.

4) Existing Studies Use One Method and Scale

Both the original and revised UCLA loneliness scales (Russell, Peplau, & Ferguson, 1978; Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980) have been tremendously influential in and important to the study of loneliness. Various other scales (e.g., Schmidt & Sermat, 1983) have been introduced, but the UCLA Loneliness Scale is by far the most popular instrument used in the study of loneliness. It has been the most-used instrument for studying loneliness since it was introduced: in 1989, Paloutzian and Janigian reported that 80% of the research studies on loneliness used the original or revised UCLA loneliness scale. I believe the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale, which consists of 20 Likert-type items, really does get to many of the issues and experiences that surround the feeling of loneliness. However, I also agree with those who suggest that we cannot possibly sum up all the ways of manifesting loneliness in 20 short, variously interpretable statements like, "There are people I feel close to" (e.g., Wood, L., 1989).

Russell (1982), one of the scholars who developed the scale, relates that he and his colleagues attempted to create a scale that would encourage empirical research on loneliness. Therefore, they began from a global approach to loneliness in their attempt to create a scale that would help identify "common themes that characterized the experience of loneliness for a broad spectrum of individuals" (Russell, 1982, p. 90). The scale is used so
broadly, however, that different scholars sometimes claim it assesses different phenomena:

The revised UCLA Loneliness Scale measures "the extent to which one experiences chronic loneliness." (Hosman, 1991, p. 75)

The scale's twenty items "ask about the quality and quantity of the respondent's relations with others." (Reinking & Bell, 1991, p. 365)

The "unidimensional" scale contains "items pertaining to perceived deficiencies in interpersonal relationships." (Sadava & Matejcic, 1987, p. 58)

The scale can be studied in terms of two dimensions derived from a Principal Factor Analysis: "The first dimension was labeled 'intimate other' and was measured by ten items. Statements such as: 'I lack companionship,' 'No one really knows me well,' and 'There are people who really understand me,' made up this dimension. The second dimension was measured by ten items and was labeled 'social network.' Items which measured the social network dimension were: 'I feel in tune with people around me,' 'I feel part of a group of friends,' and 'People are around me but not with me.'" (Zakahi & Duran, 1982, p. 206)

The scale "asks about the frequency with which certain feelings associated with loneliness have been experienced." (Bell & Roloff, 1991, p. 62)

Obviously, many scholars are attempting to address different aspects of loneliness but are using the same scale to measure it.

The UCLA loneliness scale is so widely used because it is short, easy to administer, highly reliable, and "appears to be valid both in assessing loneliness and discriminating between loneliness and other related constructs" (Russell, 1982, p. 96). At times, however, it is used to address aspects of loneliness it was never intended to measure. Zakahi & Duran (1982), for instance, seemingly attempted to transform the global measure of loneliness into two distinct constructs similar to Weiss's (1973) ideas on social
and emotional isolation. Indeed, there seems to be a simultaneous recognition of many different ways of feeling loneliness and a methodological dismissal of those differences. Researchers take as a given possible distinctions within loneliness but almost inevitably rely on a unidimensional scale to assess the multidimensional phenomenon.

The methods used in the study of loneliness have helped shape the conceptions of loneliness in the research. Because the scales already define loneliness within the instrument, extensions beyond the boundaries of the instrument are not allowed. Paloutzian and Janigian (1989) suggest that we find more methods that allow us to "observe people in situations where loneliness occurs and allow the types to emerge for themselves, rather than to identify situations or people's responses that fit our preconceived categories" (pp. 33-34). In order to understand the experience of loneliness, a multiplicity of methods and approaches must be available to the study of loneliness that open up new ways of viewing the phenomenon. Other possibilities include a narrative analysis (e.g., Fisher, 1987), rhetorical approaches, such as cluster criticism (e.g., Foss, 1996, ch. 4) and metaphoric criticism (e.g., Foss, 1996, ch. 9), or the study of interviewees' epiphanies (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Another issue important to the study of loneliness concerns the use of loneliness scales that make people self-select as lonely or not. Even with anonymous questionnaires, many people may not want to write down that they are lonely due to the social stigma attached to loneliness (Russell, 1982). As Gaev (1976) explains:

People are searching for ways to overcome their loneliness; but, they are afraid to admit that they are lonely. Dr. Frieda Fromm-Reichmann pointed out that in our culture people are made to feel that they are supposed to be popular, and therefore, those who feel lonely don't
want to admit it and feel as if they are social failures. This kind of social pressure adds to the stress of many persons who feel unable to communicate with anyone about their loneliness. (Gaev, 1976, p. 2)

I am not suggesting that self-report data are bad or inherently flawed or that people who fill out surveys consciously and purposely lie to avoid facing, even in their own minds, that they might be lonely. I believe we do have to trust and respect self-report data. However, I also believe we must look at those data in context and be mindful of the pressures that do exist. Because of the strong cultural biases against people who feel lonely, we have many reasons to name our own feelings of loneliness as something else. Attempts to make sense of our own feelings and simultaneously to maintain levels of self-esteem that are partially predicated on not feeling those ways surely is going to complicate how questions on loneliness are answered on loneliness scales.

5) Assumed to be Negative

In this society, those who admit to loneliness are marginalized partly because loneliness is treated as a disease. Linda Wood (1989) has suggested that how we talk about loneliness is a fruitful area from which to continue research, for in our talk lie more clues to understanding more dimensions of loneliness. Consider the following explanation of loneliness:

With the disease of loneliness we have not always known where to hit. Loneliness is the single experience most common to all of us yet is also the most misunderstood. Generally, its diagnosis, if there is one, is often vague or downright misleading. Today huge throngs of people are suffering from the disease and going untreated because they are not aware of the nature of their ailment. Until the problem is understood and correctly diagnosed there can be no effective prescription for its cure. . . . One reason the disease has now reached epidemic proportions is that it is frequently hidden under the disguise of many other experiences in life. (Tanner, 1973, pp. ix-x)
Metaphors of loneliness as sickness or disease are pervasive, particularly in literature from the 1970s, but hints of the loneliness-as-sickness theme exist even in current literature, particularly in psychology literature:

A conceptual framework is developed for including loneliness as a problematic but treatable condition in individuals at risk for more serious complications. (Evans & Dingus, 1989, p. 249)

Children who form insecure relationships with their parents are considered at risk for a variety of mental health problems, one of which is loneliness among peers. (Bullock, 1993, p. 48)

That illness metaphors are rampant in loneliness research is no accident; in this society, loneliness is a disease, maligned, and something to be avoided or cured.

6) Focus on Negative Outcomes

Whenever there is a correlation between loneliness and a relational outcome, the correlation is predetermined to be negative. Undergirding most research is an assumption that loneliness will be a negative force or a symptom of negative relational skills. Sadava and Matejcic (1987), for example, reported on loneliness within the first several years of marriage. Their assumptions (as well as those of the earlier studies on which their assumptions are based) are that loneliness that exists within relationships is directly correlated to an absence of attachment and/or a distant, hostile interpersonal orientation. They hypothesized that loneliness is correlated with lower levels of love and liking and lower levels of marital satisfaction. Finally, they suggest that the "confirmation that loneliness exists among married people, while not particularly astonishing in an age of frequent divorce, is significant in itself" (Sadava & Matejcic, 1987, p. 62), therein equating loneliness with a poor marriage.
Thus, the study of loneliness is based on a relational deficit model. Schmidt and Sermat's (1983) scale "describes loneliness in terms of a subjectively felt discrepancy between the kinds of relationships the individual perceives himself as having and what he would like to have" (p. 1039); from the outset, therefore, they predetermined a discrepancy. Their scale represents an effort to identify different kinds of interaction contexts and different kinds of relationships (i.e., romantic-sexual relationships, friendships, relationships with family, and relationships with larger groups), but always the assumption holds that the loneliness—even if due to overgrand relationship expectations—is an indication of a relational lack.

A majority of research does not even consider the possibility of loneliness being positive for relationships. Moustakas’s (1961) work is one exception that highlights this problematic assumption in the literature. Moustakas writes about the value of loneliness in ways that transform the meaning of the experience:

> All suffering which is accepted and received with dignity eventuates in deepened sensitivity. One cannot be sensitive without knowing loneliness. To see is to be lonely—to hear, feel, touch—every vital, solitary experience of the senses is a lonely one. ... To be open to life in an authentic sense is to be lonely, for in such openness one hears and feels and senses beyond the ordinary. ... We are able to grow in awareness, in understanding, in aesthetic capabilities, in human relations. (p. 101)

Moustakas's perspective on loneliness is very different from the majority of scholars who study loneliness as something to be avoided. He acknowledges the pain of loneliness and sees—in our acceptance and recognition of loneliness—the possibility for deep living and meaningful relating: "Loneliness enables one to return to a life with others with renewed hope and vitality, with a fuller dedication, with a deeper desire to come to a healthy
resolution of problems and issues involving others, with possibility and hope for a rich, true life with others" (p. 102). Moustakas's work shows the possibility of viewing loneliness as a positive experience for relationships.

7) Assumption of Similarity Across Sex

Some studies suggest that more women tend to feel lonely than men, while other studies evidence no sex difference in feeling loneliness (Weiss, 1982, p. 76). In all of the loneliness studies, however, the same scales are applied to males and females, suggesting that loneliness looks the same for men and women. Sex may affect the experience of loneliness in significant ways, and my hunch is that the loneliness scale is based more on a feminine model than on a masculine model. For instance, Bell and Gonzalez (1988) and many others suggest that loneliness is less likely to be felt if a person has someone with whom he or she can discuss problems; females traditionally value this emotional sharing approach to relationships more than males (Wood & Inman, 1993). Males may tend to discuss problems less than females simply because they put less value on that process. But because interpersonal closeness typically is considered a cure-all for loneliness, males often are considered to be at greater risk for loneliness when, in fact, they may not feel lonely because they value interpersonal closeness less. And even if males do feel that loneliness, they might feel it in different ways because, in general, they value the "cure" less than females (Murphy & Kupshik, 1992).

Research is now revealing that intimacy looks different from male and female points of view. Surely loneliness looks different from male and female points of view as well. When scores of loneliness are assessed, they should address human beings in all their dimensionality. Loneliness will not feel the same for different people, and certainly sex and gender expectations
affect experiences in relating to others. Current research on loneliness, however, does not deal with the complexity of sex and gender differences.

8) Mostly College Students are Studied

Paloutzian and Janigian (1989) report that 80% of the research subjects participating in studies of loneliness are college students: "The majority of the psychological study of loneliness," they suggest, "has been primarily a one-scale, one-subject-pool science" (p. 34). This sampling problem, of course, is common in many areas of research, but its pervasiveness makes it no less significant and casts doubt on the utility of loneliness research that is meant to be generalized to the wider population. First, college students may experience particular kinds of loneliness due to the unique situation of student life—if so, their narrower, more situational experience of loneliness cannot be assumed to account for all experiences of loneliness. Second, most college students are relatively young, and many will have had little experience with long-term intimate relationships. As such, they are not likely to have much experience with loneliness as it might exist within a romantic relationship.

9) Studied Apart from Relationships

Several studies or position papers do address particular relationships as the context for loneliness (e.g., Bullock, 1993; Duck, Pond, & Leatham, 1994; Sadava & Matejcic, 1987; Schmidt & Sermat, 1983). Most of the time, however, they consider the relationship to be merely the backdrop, the environment in which the lonely feeling occurs, and therefore they do not really address the lived relationship. For instance, Cutrona (1982) presents findings on college students' transition to college and the degree to which loneliness is related to the kinds of relationships the lonely have available to
them. Still, however, the underlying idea is that the proper balance of autonomy and connection is likely to relieve loneliness. Likewise, Cutrona, reporting on the UCLA New Student Study, found that "dissatisfaction with friends was most closely linked to loneliness" (p. 297). Again, friendships as well as family and romantic relationships are considered—but only as a correlate to how their health is related to the level of loneliness felt by the dissatisfied. Jones (1989) aptly summarized this problem with current loneliness research as "the tendency to view loneliness as a substitute measure of the quality and quantity of an individual's relationships. . . . In this sense, the study of loneliness is the study of an internal syndrome or state and not the study of relationships" (pp. 28-29).

"Loneliness," May Sarton reportedly said, "is most acutely felt with other people." Similarly, Burns (1985), author of a popular self-help book, related that "being married does not in any way protect you from feeling lonely. . . . We often think of loneliness as an affliction of people who are single, separated, or divorced. But, in fact, married people experience just as much loneliness and sometimes more" (pp. 5-6). Sarton's and Burn's words are striking because they are contrary to popular notions of loneliness, contrary to the ideas of loneliness as an individual predicament, wholly apart from relating.

Method

We cannot . . . let the methods dictate our images of human beings (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 373).

This dissertation was designed to address many of the problems with the existing loneliness research. The general research questions guiding this study were: 1) What meanings do individuals attribute to a feeling of
loneliness if they feel it within the context of what they perceive to be an intimate relationship that is healthy and strong? 2) What is the relationship between feelings of loneliness and communication with one's intimate partner? This dissertation extends previous explanations and studies of loneliness by offering participants the opportunity to name for themselves if—and if so, how—they experience loneliness in a relational context.

Participants

I interviewed a snowball sample of 29 individuals who perceived themselves to be in good, healthy, committed, romantic relationships. As I mentioned earlier, the participants themselves determined whether or not they were in good romantic relationships. My project was not to look for proof of healthy intimacy—if the participants perceived their relationship to be strong, I respected their perception and realized that our interview interaction never could expose me fully to the complexities of their relationships. The sample size of 29 individuals was arbitrary (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Included as Appendix A is a letter sent to potential participants whose names were given to me by people I already had interviewed. I sent this letter and let them contact me if interested. I did not call them and ask for their participation because the delimiting question, "Do you consider yourself to be in a good, healthy, committed intimate relationship?," would be difficult to answer negatively and is a personal question that could have made potential participants uncomfortable.

In addition to the letters, I issued a call for volunteers (see Appendix B) that I posted both physically in various local businesses where I have contacts and electronically in general newsgroups in the Columbus, Ohio, area. The
call for volunteers included numerous ways to contact me; when interested individuals phoned or e-mailed me to inquire about participation, I explained the basic structure of the interview and my purpose for conducting the research, after which we arranged a place and time to meet.

The individuals in the sample had diverse sexual orientations. I do not wish to add to the heterosexist bias in existing relationships literature by considering, for instance, only straight, married couples. Although ample research suggests that heterosexual and homosexual relationships are dissimilar in many ways and should not be judged or measured against one model, I am convinced that separating out homosexual relationships as "different" or "other" is unnecessary. All types of intimacy need not be similar in terms of sexual orientation or practice to meet the criterion of fulfilling intimacy.

Although not limited by sexual orientation, the sample did have some boundaries to enable me to converse coherently about all of the interviews. The first delimitation imposed on the sample of adults who considered themselves to be in good intimate relationships was that the couple should have been together at least six years. Research indicates that the divorce rate declines significantly after six or seven years of commitment to a marriage (e.g., see Eshleman, 1994, ch. 12). Although not all of these individuals were married, previous research is strong enough to indicate that for most committed heterosexual couples—married or not—the majority of deep relational difficulty will have been worked through by the sixth or seventh
year of the relationship. Staying together for that long, then, is additional
evidence of a couple's relational health.1

The second sample delimitation was that the couple should not have
children living with them. Ample research suggests that the presence of
children changes a relationship significantly and that marital satisfaction
declines considerably after children enter the family (e.g., Glenn &
McLanahan, 1982). As Eshleman (1994) suggests:

Overwhelming evidence has documented that, in American society,
the presence of children in the family lowers marital happiness for the
parents. This is true for subpopulations delineated on the basis of sex,
race, level of education, religious preference, employment status, and
other groupings. (p. 383)

Although I do not consider this delimitation to be a control—as if
childlessness were controlling for anything—I do believe that the presence of
children fundamentally changes the character of the intimate relationship
between the parents. Therefore, I sought out individuals in couple
relationships without children in the house.

A summary of participants' relationships and a table of the
demographic characteristics of the sample are included as Appendices C and
D.

Procedures

The general structure of the face-to-face interview was as follows. The
participants and I arranged a convenient, private meeting place where we
could be undisturbed for the duration of the interview. We met in their

1 Certainly, heterosexual and homosexual couples have many different
issues with which to deal during their relational navigation, but for lack of
similar information for homosexual couples, I use the same length of time—
six years—as the delimiting rule for all the couples in this study.
homes, workplaces, or on campus. Upon my arrival, I set up my tape-recording equipment while we made small talk. As we settled into the interview, I explained that the research study had been approved by the standard procedures of The Ohio State University's institutional review board. Before turning on the tape recorder and with the interviewee's permission, I read aloud the consent form (Appendix E), so that I knew they had heard and understood it and they knew that I was serious about my offer to discontinue the interview at any time.

I next asked the interviewees to fill out a brief personal profile form (Appendix F) with demographic data to help me with my analysis. The questions were meant to provide a simple way to address more fully the complexity of the participants' romantic lives. These initial questions helped provide a bigger context for the particular. I obviously was unable to address every detail of people's lives—and that was not the intent of this study—but I would be remiss to ignore the varied social positions that inevitably affect people's relational lives. For instance, among other identities, individuals' race, class\(^2\), sexual orientation, sex, and age surely affects their experience of loneliness.

I began each interview with a flexible interview protocol (Appendix G) designed to elicit discussion of participants' ideas about their intimate relationships and about loneliness. As Weiss (1982) suggests,\(^2\)

\(\text{\footnotesize \begin{tabular}{l} \text{2 The personal profile sheet contains questions on occupation and education. Using the Hollingshead (1957) index as a guide, the answers to the questions on occupation and education provide a rough estimate of social class. With this index, therefore, I did not need to ask directly about income, a question that may seem too intrusive for many participants.} \\
\end{tabular}}\)
it does not seem likely . . . that we will ever find an objective correlate of loneliness that will tell us that loneliness is present without our having to ask, in the way that pupil dilation might tell us that receptive interest is present, or jaw clenching that anger is present. For better or worse, it seems that we are always going to have to rely on the reports of respondents. (p. 72)

The interviews were loosely structured around the questions on the protocol. The questions started with a general description of the interviewees' relationships. I started with a very broad, open-ended question: "In general, how would you describe your relationship with X to me so that I might understand it?" The question allowed the respondents to share with me their vision of their relationships so that I had, in effect, some context when they spoke about their relationships throughout the interview. Also, it allowed them the opportunity to discuss positive aspects of their relationships, if they chose, and, as such, provided a way to "warm up" for some of the more specific questions that were to come later in the interview. The fourth question, "What are some of the things about your relationship that might help explain why you feel your relationship is good?" also provided a sense of what the interviewees meant by "good" relating and gave me a sense of what they expected to find in a good intimate relationship.

The second and third questions concerned access to networks of family and friends; they were: "Do you have what you consider a sufficient network of friends accessible to you? Do you have what you consider sufficient access to your family members? Does your partner?" and "To what extent do your friends and family support your romantic relationship? How important is that to you?" These questions were designed to speak to the ideas of social isolation. As mentioned in the literature review, loneliness can be manifest in various forms, including social isolation or a lack of community ties.
These two questions addressed the interviewees' broader social lives as important to the functioning of their intimate relationships with their partners.

The remaining questions dealt with loneliness specifically. I had to begin with my interviewees' definition of **loneliness** because their answers about whether or not they had felt lonely within their intimate relationship otherwise would make little sense. By asking them to describe a concrete time when they felt lonely, I then was able to point specifically back to those particular feelings when asking if they had ever felt lonely within their intimate relationship: "Can you recall a time inside this good relationship—when things between the two of you were fine—when you felt any of those ways that you described to me as lonely ways?" This question allowed participants to focus in on a different context and to brainstorm about their ideas about loneliness within the good relationship.

With the follow-up questions came much of the focus of the study: "How did you respond to that feeling? Did you call that feeling **loneliness** or something different? Have you ever discussed this with your partner? What was your partner's reaction?" These questions allowed me to draw connections among a sense of loneliness, reactions to it, and relational communication processes and outcomes. All of the questions were important to the study, but these questions were central to the issue of relational loneliness and its link to communication.

Finally, included as Appendix H is a copy of the open letter given to all volunteers after the interview. I gave each person at least two copies of the letter, which is essentially the same letter as the invitation to potential
participants (Appendix A). I asked them to hand out the letter to friends and acquaintances. This effort helped to enlarge my snowball sample.

I kept a journal in which, after each interview, I wrote my impressions of how the interview went, my interpretations of interviewees' nonverbal behaviors, and my own affective responses to each session. The journal was useful in the research process as a means of understanding my own responses and as a place to brainstorm about possible connections. Because I wrote in the journal directly after the interviews, it was also a way to begin to analyze an interview when I was still very present with it.

I transcribed the interviews, read and listened to them repeatedly, and looked for themes as to how these people made sense of feelings of loneliness. The central method I used to analyze the interview data was analytic induction (Znaniecki, 1934), which is similar in many ways to the grounded-theory approach to data offered by Glaser and Strauss (1967). In both methods, the "collection, coding and analysis of data are all inextricably bound up with each other" (Bulmer, 1979, p. 666). Both methods can feature theme construction with the comparing and contrasting of themes in a "constant comparative method" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273). In analytic induction, the importance of interaction with both theory and evidence is emphasized more so than in grounded theory, which assumes more of a tabula rasa approach to observation (Bulmer, 1979). In analytic induction,

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3 Owen (1984) has suggested that, particularly for the study of relationships, thematic interviews can be useful. He suggested that relational themes "are less a set of cognitive schema than a limited range of interpretations that are used to conceptualize and constitute relationships" (Owen, 1984, p. 274). This is important because these themes were developed from the in-depth interviews and from the interviewees' own senses of what was important to them.
concept-formation ... proceeds neither from observation to category, nor from category to observation, but in both directions at once and in interaction. ... The process is one in which concepts are formed and modified both in the light of empirical evidence and in the context of theory. Both theory and evidence can exercise compelling influence on what emerges. (Bulmer, 1979, p. 653, emphasis in the original)

In this study, the literature on loneliness influenced what I expected I might find in these interviews. Certainly, I resisted the definitions and contexts for loneliness that have been posited, but, in resisting, I still was influenced.

I analyzed the interviews for connections between communication and loneliness in intimate relationships by focusing on the following steps:

1) Thematic Analysis of Meanings of Loneliness. Chapter two is composed of an inductive analysis, following the processes proposed by Znaniecki (1934), to develop themes or patterns about the meaning that loneliness has both in general and when it is named as existing within an intimate relationship.

That specific inductive process is described by Bulmer (1979):

First (a) discover which characters in a given datum of a certain class are more, and which less, essential. Then (b) abstract these characters and assume that the more essential are the more general than the less essential and must be found in a wider variety of classes. Follow this by (c) testing this hypothesis by investigating classes in which both the former and the latter are found. Finally, (d) establish a classification, i.e., organize all these classes into a scientific system based on the functions the respective characters play in determining them. (pp. 661-62)

Because we do not yet have general principles regarding the experience of relational loneliness, an inductive approach was necessary to explain the concept (Bulmer, 1979). 2) Description. The thematic analysis enriched understandings of the phenomenon of relational loneliness; the second part of chapter two, therefore, describes in as full and detailed a way as possible the
experience of relational loneliness. Several scholars have noted that loneliness only can be described and not defined (Cherry & Smith, 1993; Weiss, 1989); therefore, in the process of developing themes about the experience, I have proposed a sensitizing concept of relational loneliness and its manifestations. A sensitizing concept differs from a definition in that "while definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest direction along which to look. . . . Since what we infer does not express itself in the same fixed way, we are not able to rely on fixed objective expressions to make the inference" (Blumer, 1954, pp. 7, 8, as cited in Bulmer, 1979, p. 654). 3) Links to Communication. Chapter three entails a discussion of links between communication and loneliness, in direct response to the second research question. 4) Theory of Relational Loneliness. Finally, in an attempt to place these findings within the broader communication study of intimate relationships and loneliness, I posited a theory of relational loneliness. This theory primarily explains the relationships among the themes and descriptions, or, as Glaser (1978) suggests, the theoretical coding "conceptualizes how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory" (as cited in Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 277). This step more closely follows the grounded-theory assumptions of theory construction from qualitative data analysis. The theory also raises questions about the connections of relational loneliness with broader social issues and relational identities.

Consistent with a major argument of grounded theory that "multiple perspectives must be systematically sought during the research inquiry" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 280), I scheduled an open, optional meeting during which I explained my interpretations and discussed the study with interested
participants (see Appendix I). In so doing, I hoped to receive their perspective on my own perspective, an approach that offers multiple layers of interpretations rather than simply stopping with my own. I offered all interviewees the opportunity to receive feedback on the whole study and to speak to conclusions I drew by attending this focus-group meeting. I believe this step is important not only for the important "check" it gave to me on my interpretations on the subjects' words but also for general respect for the participants and their right to have a say in the conclusions. The meeting served as a way for me to gain additional insights into participants' lives and words and on my perceptions of their meanings. In addition, Brehm (1985) notes that interview participants put their personal selves on the line and that—especially in research on intimate relationships—"comparative information about the average responses of all the people in the study may be especially valuable, as subjects sometimes have concerns that their behavior was unusual" (p. 50-51). In case questions or comments arose for participants, I provided them with my address and phone number on the consent sheet. Finally, I agreed to mail anyone who was interested a brief review of the study and the findings.

I was not be able to "solve" all of the problems I identified with previous studies of loneliness in my literature review in my study. The study was designed, however, to begin to correct some of those problems. Following is a brief review of my position or my attempt to compensate, in this study, for what I perceive as lacking in the literature: 1) Loneliness is studied as a personal phenomenon without regard to the broader social context: This study focused on loneliness and relationships as cultural constructions, and, although social context is a secondary focus, I grounded
my analysis of the interviews in a consideration of societal pressures and norms. Although my sample is very diverse in terms of age and sexual orientation, it is diverse only marginally in terms of race (with 25 white people and 4 people of color) and in terms of social class (with 25 middle-income participants and 4 lower income participants).

2) Loneliness is assumed to be the result of a deficiency in social skills: In this study, lonely persons were not assumed to be lacking social skills or romantic partners; indeed, the study required that all participants perceive themselves to be in good intimate relationships.

3) Loneliness is studied as a unidimensional concept: In this study, the participants themselves spoke to what they mean by loneliness. I started with my own ideas about loneliness, but the interviewees conveyed to me and built upon their own multidimensional definitions.

4) Existing studies use primarily one method and one scale: In this study, a different method was used from that typically used; instead of relying on the UCLA scale, I used qualitative interviews and inductively analyzed the data.

5) Loneliness is assumed to be negative: I do not believe that loneliness, necessarily, is bad, and I conveyed that stance to all participants. I do believe that the stigma and taboo associated with the feeling of loneliness are strong and that loneliness can and often does have negative outcomes. I do not believe, however, that it always must. In this study, I rejected the assumption that loneliness inherently is bad by entering into the interviews with an assumption that, indeed, these relationships are good, healthy relationships and that any felt loneliness had not been a symptom or a cause of relational decay.

6) Existing studies focus on negative outcomes of loneliness for relationships: Because I believe in the possibility of positive consequences from feeling lonely within intimacy, the open-ended questions
allowed participants the opportunity to speak to experiences and outcomes that were both positive and negative. 7) Existing studies have an assumption of similarity across sex: In this study, I did not assume that everyone experiences loneliness in the same way; hence, the interview protocol included a question about what loneliness means to each person. I know that sex affects perceptions and expectations and experiences of intimacy; with this study, I have begun to discover how it affects loneliness. 8) Mostly college students are studied: With an average age of 41 and a range from 25 to 80 years of age, this sample went beyond the university community and included people with diverse occupations and educational levels. 9) Loneliness is studied apart from relationships: Finally, the central focus of this study was that loneliness can exist inside the intimate relationship. Although I interviewed individuals separately, I have focused primarily on felt loneliness within the context of intimacy.

Assumptions

This study was built upon feminist assumptions, many of which overlap with assumptions of qualitative research in general. To better understand the methodological choices I have made, I include in this section a discussion of the feminist assumptions that I brought to this qualitative study. These include a belief in a holistic perspective, an acknowledgment of the importance of self-reflexivity, a focus on process and the changing nature of any research study, a commitment to mutuality and reciprocity, and an acceptance of the notion that gender shapes epistemology.

Holistic Perspective

The feminist effort to bridge theory and practice in communication study necessitates viewing human communication within a larger context.
Because interpersonal communication study tends to focus primarily on the communication that happens between people in particular relationships, it can be transformed by a feminist stance. Interpersonal scholarship does not often acknowledge the wider societal influences on the communicative relationships between and among people. Rubin (1983) asserted that society and personality live in a continuing reciprocal relationship with each other. The search for personal change without efforts to change the institutions within which we live and grow will, therefore, be met with only limited reward. And the changes we seek will not be fully ours unless and until we understand where the roots of our problems lie. (p. 206)

Rubin's prescription is built on feminist notions of changing institutional structures, and it troubles the kind of interpersonal communication study that does not often take societal structures into account in its study of human relationships.

In this study, I consciously place the particular relational phenomenon of loneliness within intimacy into a wider context. Although my main purpose concerns explicating individuals' definitions of loneliness in their relationships, I am aware that these individuals' social identities and roles affect their stances and must be acknowledged. Toward that end, I asked participants to provide demographic information to help elucidate the positions from which they are participating. Also, I actively sought out individuals in both heterosexual and gay/lesbian relationships. Since little research has addressed loneliness within social roles, I offer possibilities of connections and raise questions for future research.

Self-Reflexivity

Crucial to feminist scholarship is feminist researchers' awareness of our own positions and how those positions influence the questions we ask,
the way we seek to address those questions, and the interpretations we gain from our study. Feminist scholars typically are invested in critiquing their own subject positions; they hold a belief that they "should locate themselves in the same critical plane as their overt subject matter; that is, researchers must take their own embeddedness in history, class, gender, and race as causal for their own investigations, rather than seeing only others as affected" (Steiner, 1989, p. 167). In so doing, feminist scholarship underlines the importance of the researcher inside the research process (Harding, 1991).

In the social science tradition, a recent advancement toward self-reflexivity is in the practice of researchers listing their own subject positions and thereby acknowledging on a basic level that their race/sex/class—all of their various identities—influence the research. Taking my subjectivity into account means taking responsibility for my own assumptions, for admitting them in the first place, and acknowledging that my various social positions have something to do with my research (c.f., Houston, 1992; Marty, 1996).

In this study, I pay attention to the fact of my identities and positions—to my femaleness and whiteness and heterosexuality, for example—in the research design and in my interaction with the people I interview. My positions affect my interpretations and the questions I ask. For example, I began this study with assumptions about commitment that included a more closed relational stance; heterosexuals are more likely to believe in and practice a more closed form of relating, where the intimate relationship is strictly boundaried, while gays and lesbians are more likely to believe in and practice a more open form of relating, where the intimate circle is broader. In acknowledging my own positionality, I decided to ask the participants themselves to define for me what they meant by commitment.
Focus on Process

Perhaps one of the key elements that especially distinguishes feminist scholarship is its insistence on focusing on the process of research. I view a focus on process as strongly tied to self-reflexivity. In the research process, for instance, feminist methods are supposed to allow for intersubjectivity of researcher and researched: this intersubjectivity "will permit the [feminist] researcher constantly to compare her work with her own experiences as a woman and a scientist and to share it with the researched, who then will add their opinions to her research, which in turn might change it again" (Duelli-Klein, 1980, p. 56). The process itself is as important as the "end result," and it can be, in fact, the end in itself.

In this study, I noted that in some participants' attempts to negotiate the interview and perhaps some of their own dissonance, they asked me questions about my personal life and about the study. "Are you married?" "Do you have lots of friends?" "Have you ever felt lonely?" "Why are you doing this research?" "What did other people say?" I always responded to their questions--and in fact, invited them at the beginning of the interview to ask me whatever they wanted to know--and occasionally sensed that my opening up to their questions in turn opened up the interview. This mutual self-disclosure, common especially in interviews influenced by traditional feminist thought (Minister, 1991), provided them a break from the spotlight and perhaps was a chance to test me out, to get more of a handle on how I was perceiving their responses, and to figure out if I would apply negative judgments to those who admitted loneliness. I cannot say with any certainty how my willingness to expose myself influenced the responses of those who asked. I only know that in this research project, the people I interviewed
asked more personal questions of me than I have ever been asked in sensitive interview situations. Perhaps this dynamic came from the intrinsic dilemma posed in a situation wherein the "best" answer to the interview's central focus ("Yes, I have felt lonely in my relationship") puts them in a vulnerable, if not precarious, emotional position (having admitted to what some might consider relational weakness).

Some tenets of feminist thought emphasize the particular need to focus on the affective element of process. Reason and emotion have been split apart in traditional Western notions of science, and credibility in academe has largely rested on (ostensibly emotionless) reason (Jaggar, 1989). Perhaps part of the reason that other kinds of research are not very process oriented is that emotion is inherently part of the process of research, and according to many notions of objectivity, emotion is not supposed to be there. We do not typically address emotionality in any part of our research, particularly in the explication of the findings:

Notably missing, or at least reduced to virtual silence, is the passion that obviously drives our choices to write about particular topics in particular ways. Our writings suppress our convictions, our enthusiasm, our anger, in the interest of achieving an impersonal, "expert" distance and tone. . . . Masked also are the mistakes we inevitably make in the process of research and writing. (Blair, Baxter, & Brown, 1994, p. 383)

We like or dislike the people we interview. We can empathize with some people we interview but not others (see Reinharz, 1992, ch. 1). We are happy or unhappy with how our research is going. We are moved to study something that has touched our lives. How does that affect our interpretations? Essentially, focusing on our own affective states highlights the possibility that we are influencing our own results. Feminist research
suggests that emotion always plays a part in our research process, no matter what methods we use.

In this study, emotion—mine and that of the interviewees—definitely played a role in the research process. I was very angry after two particular interviews, frightened during one, bemused by several, and enchanted by many. My various responses were important because, in analyzing my affective response to the interviews, I learned more about my own ideas about relationships in general, ideas that color my study. I know now, for example, that I do not connect individualism with intimacy. Neither, in fact, do most scholars who posit definitions of intimacy; nevertheless, in this study, I was trying to allow participants themselves to define for me their own views about what good relationships entail. Even as that was my goal, I had responses toward people's answers that indicated to me that I felt some, perhaps, were more right than others--some were more intimate than others. After the interviews with Joyce and with Greg to which I (later, privately) responded with fury, I focused in my journal on acknowledging and then understanding my own response as important to the process:

[Journal notation about the interviews with Joyce and Lorraine:] I have a lot to write about here. These two women talked to me from 7:00 until 11:30. I'm feeling a little fried. Part of me feels pissed, too. What's that about? I felt partially like maybe they used me. They were great in the classic sense of an interview model—they didn't seem to think the interview needed to be conversational. They talked a lot about themselves. I noticed it. Did that bother me? Maybe partly. Because my bias is that there should (damn) be some kind of emphasis on relating (or on the other). Here, the emphasis was smack on the individuals. To an unbelievable extent. Is that why I feel pissed? . . . Committed means that I'll stay with you as long as the relationship is beneficial to me. Lonely means emotional disconnection with self, out of sync with self. [Journal notations that surfaced after writing about Tim's interview:] Why am I doing this? I'm surprising myself, my
judgmental tone is surprising me. I was mad at Joyce and Lorraine! I did not know what to do with them. They do not fit on my scale. And? That matters to me because . . . ? And here—why do I care that Tim demands attention? It's like I want to be The Interpreter. Ultimately, I do have that power because I'm writing the dissertation. But I say I want to respect their interpretations.

[Journal notation about the interview with Greg:] I was impatient. I felt very impatient with this man, although I tried to keep that in check. His interview was remarkably similar to Joyce's. I was amazed. He used some of the same language Joyce used, some of the same phrases. He mentioned his abuse as a child, his fear of intimacy, his therapy. They described their relationship as composed of two individuals. Again, just like Joyce and Lorraine. And these people had so much relationship vocabulary! Greg had read *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus*, and could speak in terms that came from work, from working to understand relational dynamics. Interesting to me, that the folks who show the most relational knowledge are the least connected.

In examining what I considered my somewhat embarrassing and certainly unscientific reactions, I came to crucial insights about my own views on intimacy that I then could at least acknowledge had an impact on my own interpretations of the responses given by Joyce and Greg. To some extent, in understanding my response, I was able to let it go and listen more clearly to Joyce and Greg. Had I not done so, I may have carried my response with me; my response well could have come out in covert ways, subtly asserting itself and affecting to an even greater extent my interpretations of their words. Instead, with my own acknowledgment of my affective response, I questioned my own intentions and interpretations very carefully when dealing with Joyce's and Greg's words.

The examples I just offered from my journal were of negative responses to interviews. Far more often, I had deeply positive responses that were just as important to note because they, too, were resonating over against
my own belief structures about good relating. In many instances, I responded positively to those who actively struggled in the interview, no matter what their ideas about relationships entailed. Although Kathryn described a relationship that was very different from my own ideal, I had a very positive response to her interview and to her sincere struggle to relate it. Laurie, as well, hit a chord with me that was reflected in our interview as we "clicked" and began to finish each other's sentences. Perhaps some of my affective response was related to the degree to which the interviewees became involved in the interview situation—and although across the board, I was outwardly respectful to the interviewees, I know that inside I was less patient with those who evidenced no struggle, who related that they had figured out the answers.

**Mutuality and Reciprocity**

Philosophical underpinnings of much qualitative research include the idea that knowledge is co-created between the interviewer and interviewee. These ideas reflect a worldview that respects interaction and the importance of mutuality, ideas that are far from the mainstream approach to research:

A more traditional research stance would see . . . reciprocal perspective-taking on the part of interviewers and interviewees as a problem, in that what is said by a respondent is supposed to be a reflection of what is "out there" rather than as an interpretation that is jointly produced by interviewer and respondent (Briggs, 1986). What is needed, however, is a heightened awareness of the research interview as a context in which meanings ("findings") are cooperatively constructed. (Jorgenson, 1989, p. 38)

An acknowledgment of the cooperative symbolic construction of meaning influences the whole research process tremendously. One way that valuing mutuality or interdependence changes the research process is in how it
necessitates a different view of interviewees from that in traditional scientific approaches.

One way I attempted to enact the principle of mutuality and reciprocity was in offering a follow-up meeting to interested participants in which I shared the results of this research. Many respondents expressed interest in the study and in hearing more about the phenomenon. Ten of the 21 local participants said they would try to attend the followup meeting; unfortunately, perhaps because of forecasts for unexpectedly bad weather, only two participants actually were able to attend the meeting. However, for those two participants, the meeting was important as they were able to situate their own responses within a broader picture of themes. It also was important for me to offer everyone the possibility of finding out what I did with their words as that commitment served as a reminder to me to treat their interviews with care and as a reminder to them, I hope, that I valued their participation.

Feminist/qualitative interviews. Mutuality and reciprocity are emphasized in feminist interviewing. Feminist researchers have troubled what it means to conduct an academic interview. The traditional interview approach, for instance, is one built on distance and an assumed hierarchy between the untouchable and unaffected interviewer and the emotional interviewee. Oakley (1981) suggests:

"Proper" interviews in the methodology textbooks owe a great deal more to a masculine social and sociological vantage point than to a feminine one. For example, the paradigm of the "proper" interview appeals to such values as objectivity, detachment, hierarchy and "science" as an important cultural activity which takes priority over people's more individualised concerns. (p. 38)
In feminist research (in the ideal), there is no "artificial object/subject split between researcher and researched (which is by definition inherent in an approach to knowledge that praises its distant 'neutrality')" (Duelli-Klein, 1980, p. 57). It is interactive and participatory (Minister, 1991; Oakley, 1980).

I attempted to enact the principles of feminist interviewing. The goals of feminist interviewing, however, are idealized and difficult to attain. Feminist researchers, suggest Reinharz, 1992, "expect a "deep identification' that breathes life into that which is studied and into the woman doing the study" (cited in Kleinman & Copp, 1993, p. 34). This expectation places tremendous pressure on interviewers to establish a perfect feminist rapport that will facilitate the kind of sharing they hope to induce. I have yet to build a perfect rapport in any interview, but I do hold feminist interviewing as a goal.

**Gender Shapes Epistemology**

Most feminist research is predicated on the belief that our gender "serves as a lens through which all experience is filtered" and therefore does more than affect our viewpoints (Foss & Foss, 1991, p. 20). It also affects, on a basic level, how we know; it affects our way of being in the world and how we know and experience the world. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), among others, have been instrumental in developing the idea that how we know inherently is connected to our gender. The feminist belief that one's gender affects one's epistemological assumptions is a tremendous challenge to established notions of science. At the same time, feminist research (in the ideal) does not suggest that our gender determines how we know the world. We simply must be aware that our gender is not a variable, it is not something that can be parcelled out of our lives. It inherently affects
every part of our being. I believe we cannot "turn off" parts of ourselves. We can acknowledge, however, that what we do know is affected by our gender.

In this study, I attempted to address how gender interacts with assumptions about and experiences of relating and loneliness. For instance, I paid attention to gender as an issue in how people described loneliness. Men were more likely than women in this sample to equate loneliness with physical absence. Only by paying attention to literature on gender and socialization was I able to make those connections; because men's relationships are more typically centered in "doing" than are women's, perhaps the physical absence of a person is more relevant to men than to women.

Definitions

By loneliness, I mean a feeling of disconnection to self and/or to others that can manifest in a "sense of utter aloneness" (Weiss, 1973, p. 21). This definition of loneliness is a combination of ideas articulated by Weiss (1973) and Gaev (1976). I am combining the feelings associated with Weiss' definition of emotional isolation—a subjective response to a perceived lack of intimacy—with Gaev's vision of existential loneliness of the inner self to suggest that an individual's experience of loneliness may be connected to something other than a dearth of relationships or of "valid" intimacy.

The definition of intimacy that I use in this study is a combination of definitions of several communication scholars: intimacy and intimate relationships are characterized by intense mutual influence between partners; the "generation of private cultures and shared systems of meaning" that help convince partners of the unique nature of their relationship (Stephen, 1992, p.
and the assumption of a long-term future that transcends particular incidents, feelings, or relational states (Wood, 1993).

By relationship, I mean any kind of committed, interdependent romantic intimate relationship between two persons. My definition of a good relationship is less important than my respondents' definitions, as they are the ones who decided whether or not they were in "good" relationships. The purpose of this research was not to prove or disprove that individuals' relationships are healthy or good. Their perception was what counted them as eligible for the study.

One goal for me in this study was to determine defining characteristics of the phenomenon I labeled relational loneliness, a type of loneliness that occurs within good intimacy and, as I assert in later chapters, because of good intimacy. I am as yet unsure that in future studies I will continue to use relational loneliness as the descriptor of the experience. Given that loneliness generally is associated with painful affective manifestations such as "depression, . . . reportedly being less happy, less satisfied, more pessimistic and more depressed" (Bragg, 1979; Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980; Weeks, Michela, Peplau, & Bragg, 1980; Bradburn, 1969; Perlman, Gerson, & Spinner, 1978; as cited in Peplau & Perlman, 1982b, p. 10), I am not yet entirely convinced that the experience should be called loneliness. I believe it is related but, without further intensive study of the experience, I do not yet know if all of these negative associations are relevant to most people's experience.

Significance

As stated in the literature review, the only links to communication in loneliness research involve an assumed deficit, so loneliness is expected to
exist to the degree to which people lack social and communication skills. Yet, this research study shows that many people who are in satisfying relationships (which is indicative, even according to the terms of earlier research, of at least some social skill), who reportedly communicate well with their partners, and who, I can attest, communicated well with me, can experience loneliness.

Practically speaking, a theory of relational loneliness may go a long way in reassuring people who have good relationships that, indeed, their relationships are not necessarily lacking if, within them, they experience a sense of loneliness. Cultural definitions suggest that loneliness cannot occur within a "fulfilling" intimate connection. Loneliness itself is defined partially as a yearning for intimacy—so if intimacy truly exists, how can one be lonely? Some individuals may not yet have taken the latter step of making sense of this feeling of loneliness within intimacy. They may feel something that they cannot explain—indeed, something that makes no sense given their belief that they are in a "good" relationship. In this case, if human beings use their fulfilling, satisfying, intimate relationship as the context, they may not want to name their feelings loneliness because, by definition, they cannot be lonely. They may decide their intimate connection is not healthy after all because they feel a sense of something like loneliness within that relationship.

Some people, therefore, who may recognize a sense of relational loneliness but who cannot name it may have doubts about the strength of their own intimacy. They may associate the feeling of loneliness with something that belies strong intimate connection. A primary contribution of this study is to provide individuals in relationships with reassurance that
feeling something like loneliness—and/or articulating it—well may be perfectly natural in the process of human relating. The presence of loneliness can be considered part of the relating process instead of an indication of a lack in a particular intimate relationship.
CHAPTER 2

THEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF LONELINESS

The first research question guiding this study involved the meanings individuals attribute to a feeling of loneliness if they feel lonely within the context of an intimate relationship that they perceive to be healthy and strong. To address this research question, I have provided two sections in this chapter. First, I describe the experience of loneliness in general from these participants' points of view. Second, I describe the experience of loneliness when it occurs within the context of these participants' good relationships.

Loneliness is addressed in terms of themes inductively derived from the respondents' narratives according to the procedures of analytic induction (Znaniecki, 1934). These themes about the general experience of loneliness vary considerably, and the differences affect the meaning of the participants' response to the question of whether or not they have experienced loneliness within their relationship. Therefore, throughout this chapter, I analyze both general understandings of loneliness and more particular understandings of what it means to be lonely within a good intimate relationship. The sensitizing concept, more obviously present in the second half of this chapter, is indeed the sum total of this effort.
The first part of this chapter deals with meanings of loneliness in general from the point of view of participants. The second part of the chapter deals with how the participants view loneliness within the context of their relationships. To some extent, this separation is arbitrary because often, when people described loneliness in general, they were answering from the standpoint of being in a good relationship, so sometimes their general answers about the definition of loneliness were touched by that relational standpoint. Many participants said, for instance, that a situation that might best describe what they mean by loneliness would be a hypothetical situation wherein their intimate partner would be taken away. I would be remiss to think that any participants would wholly take themselves out of their personal context in answering my question about the characteristics of loneliness in general; the themes in each separate section, therefore, necessarily inform the other.

By themes, I do not mean that I only used those ideas that most participants shared with others. I did not disregard any individual's ideas if they were different from those of other individuals. Rather, the themes I constructed came first from individuals' stories. Only after I went through each interview and noted the themes that ran through it did I begin to compare to see if any themes could be combined and condensed. None of these themes, therefore, were necessarily universal to this population, and no major ideas were left out if they came from but a single interview.

Themes about Loneliness in General

This section explains participants' views of loneliness in general. This effort is important because I only can begin to understand whether or not people say they have experienced relational loneliness by considering how
they perceive loneliness in the first place. What it means to feel lonely also is affected by how participants view themselves as potential feelers of loneliness: Do they consider any loneliness as part of their own personality characteristics? About another person or relationship (or lack thereof)? About the situation?

I have grouped these different views of loneliness in three different broad categories. The first set of definitions, categorized as relational, always involves an other or others as necessary to the feeling of loneliness. The second set of definitions, categorized as centered in the individual, focuses solely on the one feeling lonely; the focus is not on the other or on the relationship but on the one and only lonely person. The third set of definitions, categorized as situational, defines loneliness as occurring due to specific circumstances or situations.

Three major categories with a total of 8 themes were derived from responses to the question, "What does 'feeling lonely' in general mean for you? What is your own personal definition—what does it mean to feel 'lonely'?" The first major category, in which general loneliness is seen as centered in relationships, had three explanatory themes: Loneliness is a void that can only be filled by another person; loneliness is feeling disconnected or isolated; and loneliness is the inability to communicate. The second major theme indicates that general loneliness is centered in the individual; it had three explanatory themes: Loneliness is a personal choice, loneliness exists in self-image, and loneliness involves the loss of meaning in life or will to live. The third major category concerns loneliness as centered in the situation and had three explanatory themes: Loneliness comes from personal associations,
loneliness is about the unknown, and loneliness is associated with death. All of these themes are explained and illustrated in the first half of this chapter.

**General Loneliness is Centered in Relationships**

This set of definitions is grouped together because the definitions all are based on relationships. People who contributed to this theme suggested that loneliness is about a relationship; loneliness somehow involves other people. Those who held this view suggested that loneliness is a void that only can be filled by another person, that loneliness is feeling disconnected or isolated, and that loneliness is the inability to communicate.

**A Void That Only Can be Filled by Another Person**

This first theme is of loneliness as a void that literally can be filled only by the presence of another person. Bob named this theme in his talk about what it would mean for him to be lonely:

*Lonely, to me, would be life without Jack.* I've never felt loneliness in that kind of sense. Because I always knew that he was gonna walk through the door at the end of the night. *To me, the idea of loneliness would be if Jack died.* And sitting there in that house knowing that no one's going to walk through that door. *It's a void inside of you, loneliness is, that can only be filled by another person.* (emphasis added)

Bob suggested that, with the presence of his relational partner, he would not feel lonely; feeling lonely would be centered on the absence of his partner and intimate relationship. Obviously relational, this way of understanding loneliness is dependent on another person, and participants described this major theme in ways including feeling a partner's physical absence, feeling as if the relationship did not exist, and feeling a lack of human stimulation.

*Physical absence.* Lewis contributed to this theme of loneliness as a void that only can be filled by another person by suggesting that loneliness is
due to physical absence. He cannot even imagine feeling lonely unless he
and his wife Marguerite were separated:

The only way that I could imagine feeling [lonely] at this point in time
was if I was physically separated from my wife for a lengthy period of
time. And I flat out wouldn't do it. I have friends who commute in
their marriage. I have no desire to live my life like that at all. And
maybe I've reached a point in time where I'm too dependent on my
wife for emotional support and strength and stability in my life and
feeling filled by her existence in my life. I mean, God forbid that
something's going to happen some day and she's not going to be there.
The only way I can imagine it is if she's not around. If she's not
around, I'd be unhappy. If she's around, I'll make do with everything
else.

Since Lewis emphasized that he would never choose to live apart from
Marguerite, he has a built-in assurance that, while Marguerite is living, he
never will feel lonely.

Lewis' notion that loneliness is due to the physical presence or absence
of a person seemed to be more prevalent for the males I interviewed than for
the females. Tim, for example, has never felt lonely, he suggested, because
his needs always have been met; the way he described his needs being met is
also indicative of loneliness as existing only in the absence of another person.
Tim said he has never felt lonely and cannot imagine it because "if Rhonda
weren't there, my mother would be there." His explicit link with not having
had experienced loneliness is directly tied to the presence of a loving female
who caters to his needs. If his wife were absent or, perhaps, neglecting her
expected role, then his mother would fill that role.

Tim also suggested in his interview that loneliness is like a void in a
very different way. He appropriated loneliness and used it to indicate when
he was not getting as much attention as he wanted from his wife, Rhonda.
Although he suggested he never actually has felt lonely, he said he uses the
word to suggest attention is lacking. "I'm lonely," he playfully whines to Rhonda in order to get her to "come and love on him" as, in separate interviews, they both put it. He "demands" a lot of attention from his wife, and he'll say "I'm lonely" as a means of showing he needs more attention.

Although most respondents explicitly stated that being alone was not the same thing as being lonely, often their proclamation did not negate completely the understanding of their experience of aloneness as sometimes lonely. Bob, for instance, spoke with certainty of his belief that aloneness was wholly distinct from loneliness; yet, when he was describing the loneliest time of his life, Bob was lonely because of an imbalance between aloneness and togetherness with Jack:

One of the worst times in my life was when we were completely on different schedules. Literally, he was working night shift and I would get home, and we were passing each other. That lasted for a number of years, and it was awful. That was the closest I've been to what you said about lonely. Because I really was lonely because I really was alone. And. (Catching himself, laughing.) But I just said that wasn't my definition of lonely. [That's okay.] But do you know what I mean? [Yeah.] I was alone too much. That was a really awful time. That was really, literally being alone so much. I had too much alone time. I think it's real important to have alone time for every couple. I think people need to have alone time. And I need a lot of it, actually. And I get a lot of it, I get as much as I need. But then I had too much. I had too much time alone. (emphasis added)

Bob continued this theme throughout his interview by indicating, for instance, that "there's nothing worse than wanting to do something or be with somebody and they're not there." He described loneliness in terms of a specific person—he was lonely for Jack.

Like not being in a relationship at all. For Bob and Janice, loneliness is the feeling of not being in a relationship at all. Their stories add yet another layer to this theme of loneliness as a void that only can be filled by another
person. Bob delineated more clearly his understanding of loneliness as a void by comparing it to being single:

Those times when I was alone a lot, that's what it feels like to not be in a relationship. Of course, this is what I was when I was down. Thinking, this is like not being in a relationship. I really felt like I was missing a lot of the benefits of being a couple.

Janice described loneliness similarly:

If I had to describe the feeling, it's like when I didn't have a relationship and way before, when I didn't have anyone, no one who understood.

Their general definition of loneliness as the feeling of not being in a relationship necessarily must have an impact on their ideas on whether or not loneliness inside a relationship is possible.

Lack of human stimulation. Doug's personal definition of loneliness as a void involved the lack of human stimulation. If there were other people around him, he said, he would not name the feeling loneliness:

It's a physical sensation definitely brought on by a mental condition. The mental conditions are a lack of stimulus, certainly by other human beings—the lack of human being stimulus—the computer sitting in front of me does not do anything for loneliness. So that's what I mean by lonely. Certainly, the knowledge that it is there is a physical sensation in response to the lack of human interaction.

The feeling that Doug described is physical, it's some kind of physical sensation that's linked to other experiences that he has had, like depression, but he calls it loneliness when he interprets it as coming on because of a lack of human stimulus. He could have the same bodily reaction as when he is depressed, but when there is a lack of human interaction, that variable makes him call the sensation loneliness.
Feeling Disconnected or Isolated

This theme involves the experience of loneliness as occurring when a person feels disconnected, alienated, or somehow isolated. The reason for the disconnection is not about the physical presence or absence of the partner, however, and so is distinct from the feelings described in the previous category. Lewis helped name this theme in his interview:

A feeling of isolation, nobody to turn to. And I have been through that previously, but that's not anything that's at all relevant to my life right now. So looking back on my experience, it was just kind of a feeling of isolation.

Lewis described a general sense of isolation that other participants also described in instances when they are not in harmony with others, or when, somehow, the care-taking function of a relationship goes awry. In addition, these participants emphasized that they can feel isolated in the midst of a crowd.

Joyce's description of loneliness as disconnection or alienation vividly illustrates the general theme. Her idea of loneliness involved the visual image of a person in exile, unsafe, there by force:

Cornered in a cold, echoing room. That's what loneliness is. Physical cold. Echoing words are bouncing off, nobody's hearing, nobody's responding, the words are not giving anything or eliciting anything and there's a sense of forced into that position. So you're not necessarily shackled there, but you don't necessarily feel free, I don't necessarily feel free to move, so I feel cornered. So that's what lonely is.

Her definition is relational in a number of ways. First, nobody is responding—she is looking for someone to respond, and her words are going nowhere except bouncing around the walls of the cold room. Not only is nobody hearing or responding, but her language does not seem adequate because the
words are not eliciting any response. Also, she feels there by force. By force of what or who? Cornered by what or whom? Her definition suggests she's been put in that place (who put her there?). Even if it's her own self, a person cannot feel cornered alone—so the relational aspect implicit in her talk could refer to her own self-relating-to-self, reminiscent of Mead's (1934) idea of the self as both subject and object.

Not in harmony with others. Anandi suggested that she felt alienated or isolated when she could not connect with people, which at first she described as lonely and then she differentiated from loneliness:

So when I can't connect with people, that's what makes me lonely. Not lonely so much as alienated, isolated, alone. Not really lonely, lonely to me is not really having any companionship.

Although, at that one point, Anandi differentiated alienation from loneliness, she continued to define loneliness implicitly as isolating or disconnecting in many other places throughout her narrative. She said, for example, that to feel lonely is a very bitter and extremely miserable feeling. It's bitter because at the point you feel like you're a misfit everywhere. I tend to generalize and internalize everything. And at that point I feel like I'm a misfit in everything in life. And I feel like totally miserable and I feel, how can I go on living like this? Maybe, just half an hour or one hour, but everything comes down, and I feel totally down. I just feel like it's the end of the world. I can't go back to school and face that. I am not capable. So at that point I'm totally down in the dumps. And it's very scary because I feel like if it continues, it could make me depressive, and it's scary.

Anandi's definition of loneliness as isolating is globally relational in its effects. For a time, she literally feels alienated from the world, a misfit, an isolate. Janice also describes the feeling of loneliness as discomfort in connections with others:
If you're uncomfortable in the situation, if you don't know anybody, so not, in my opinion, void of people, but uncomfortable or sad or just out of sorts. If you're lonely. Because you don't fit in. Maybe that's not what it means, but that's what it means to me.

For Janice and all of those who contributed to this sub-theme, one of the primary descriptors of loneliness was of isolation from other people.

**Caretaking goes awry.** Marguerite described a time when, for reasons unknown to her, her mother had to be hospitalized. Because her father was traveling on business, Marguerite had to spend three days at her teacher's house while her mother was in the hospital. This suggests a more focused subcategory of loneliness as isolating or disconnecting, in that it occurs when caretaking goes awry:

[Marguerite:] That was a very lonely time. Because she didn't have any kids of her own. And it felt weird. And you're going home with your teacher. That was weird. I believe that was a very lonely time for me.

[Sharon:] And do you remember how you felt at that time?

[Marguerite:] Just kinda being weird. Confusing. Being the odd person. I would say that same feeling has occurred several times as I've grown up because she's been in the hospital a bunch. (emphasis added)

The people who described loneliness as disconnecting or alienating defined loneliness in terms of strange connections to others, either because they were not in harmony with people (as for Janice feeling out of sorts) or they were experiencing people who were new or or strange in their connections (as when Marguerite was forced to stay with her teacher).

**Isolated in the midst of others.** Most participants emphasized that even if other people are around, that does not necessarily preclude the
experience of loneliness. So the isolation they described is of the isolate-in-a-crowd variety. Rhonda and Thom spoke of this experience:

[Rhonda:] You can be in a crowded room and still feel alone. You can have feelings of being scared of where you’re going or what you’re doing. When I say scared, I mean lonely. Causing lonely feelings. It hurts. They will be times when you just want to sit and cry over it. It hurts. Because you’re longing for something that you can’t have, don’t have, maybe that you’ll never have. So it’s not a good feeling, it’s a feeling of pain. A feeling of pain. . . . I’ll look around me and think there’s not very many people I can talk to here. And feel open with. So you don’t want to say much. So you feel kinda lonely there. . . . I can’t go to anyone and talk to them about it, because I just feel like I’d be complaining and they’re not going to have a clue about what I’m talking about anyway, no matter who they are, and that gives me a feeling of loneliness.

[Thom:] To me, the word lonely is just not a good word. It’s a sad word. And it’s very possible to be in a house full of people, and you’re still kind of lonely. What you need isn’t there. Feeling that you’re the only person on this earth. You think you’re the only person whose gone through this, so you draw in a little bit, and that makes you lonely.

Many participants indicated with some emphasis—suggesting that this would be counter to the popular definition of loneliness—that they felt it was possible to be lonely in a crowd of people. These participants’ emphasis on the fact that they can feel lonely in a crowd was striking both in the number of people who mentioned it with common phrasing (“I think you can be lonely in a crowd”) and in the manner in which they spoke—that is, many spoke with a communicative stress that suggested they thought their experience was unique. Dot explained that she thought being lonely in a crowd is "hard to explain, but I feel that." This popular sub-theme to explain loneliness as possibly occurring while in the presence of others helped define the general experience of loneliness as isolation by widening the perimeters in which a person can feel lonely.
Inability to Communicate

The next relational theme involved the inability to communicate. Because communication is transactional, this way of viewing loneliness necessarily is relational. An other or others is required for interpersonal communication to occur; I can only not communicate in relation to another person. This theme of loneliness as an inability to communicate was illustrated by participants' narratives of the absence of others and of the failure of language to bridge the loneliness.

Absence of others. Sheila and Marguerite provide one of the most obvious connections of loneliness to an inability to communicate in their recognition of the absence of people with whom to share. Loneliness, they said, is not having someone to talk to:

[Sheila:] I guess if I thought about [loneliness] on Webster's kind of level, it means to not have anybody, to feel all alone and no one to talk to or share with. You just feel bad because you don't have anybody to talk to about something that's going on in your life.

[Marguerite:] Probably not having anyone to talk to about your problems in a more intimate way. Not getting into the deeper problems. That would probably be the main thing, for me.

Many people mentioned an implicit absence of another person or persons in this theme—there is, after all, nobody there with whom to talk—however, the emphasis in all of these participants' descriptions was of the lack of communication. Lewis, as well, suggested that contributing to his loneliness was his feeling that when he was all alone, he could not talk to anyone, including his parents. His talk suggested that he had people with whom he could speak if he chose to, but his physical separation from them hindered his perception of the possibility to connect:
I was living in Chicago at the time, and it was like, "I really can't talk to my parents about this. I just broke up with somebody. My friends who I used to be roommates with, I'm not roommates with them anymore. I'm here by myself. And I've got work and I don't really have anybody to talk to, to do anything with. It's just me and the mass media. Woe is me. I feel sorry for myself."

Lewis spoke nonchalantly in our interview, almost whimsically, of his experience of loneliness, as if he did not want to take it too seriously, as if it were not a serious experience. He described how he had felt lonely in the past—almost, in his "woe-is-me" talk, as if he were making fun of himself. Perhaps this attitude toward loneliness helps explain his decision not to reach beyond the boundaries of geography and telephone his parents or former roommates. Perhaps he had no one to speak to about loneliness because he did not think that loneliness itself was important enough to merit that kind of conversation or serious enough to expose his vulnerability to others.

The theme of loneliness as inability to communicate often involved the absence of an other as part of the whole equation. The absence was felt in the first place, however, primarily because there was no one with whom to communicate.

Failure of language. Another way of describing an inability to communicate can be found in Joyce's narrative. As in Joyce's earlier example of an echoing room in which "words are bouncing off, nobody's hearing, nobody's responding," Joyce described concrete examples showing how language itself had failed her and contributed to her loneliness:

When I was a young child and had been molested and was afraid to go to my parents and explain what happened. And it was sustained over a year and half or two-and-half-year period—I have no exact memory—that was a kind of loneliness where I was, that I felt backed into. And I had no words, I had no language, I was seven or eight. I had no ability. That's a feeling, like when I was in counseling and my therapist would
hit points and all of a sudden the room was not a warm, safe place, it felt cold, I felt lonely, I felt cornered because she had nailed me and I didn't want to be nailed and be forced to look at things, I didn't want to look, that I didn't yet have the words.

Joyce felt lonely for a lack of means to communicate; Marguerite, in the following example, evidenced loneliness for a lack of information around which she could communicate with others. Joyce had information but no language; Marguerite had language but no concrete information around which to form questions. For example, Marguerite's situation described previously—regarding her mother's illness—was exacerbated for her because she did not know what was happening to her family and had nobody with whom to talk. Her inability to communicate was due to the fact that she purposefully was kept uninformed and therefore literally did not know if her mother's life was in danger or not. She was lonely because she did not have information about her family's crisis situation, and she did not have access to someone to talk to about it:

I think my dad was probably dealing with things the best he could, and I remember, fourth grade, I remember my mother was in the hospital and I remember being taken home by my teacher because my dad was out of town... I think when a parent is sick, a lot of times people mean so well, and they ask all the time. "How's your mom?" and "Oh, are you doing okay?" and that gets tiring, especially for a child, because unless your parents communicate with you—and mine didn't that much—you don't really know. Why are they asking this? Your dad's saying, "She's going to be fine," but then all these other people are so concerned. Confusing. And almost every time she goes in the hospital, that same type of feeling comes up. I guess not knowing, too, about a loved one. Concerned.

Some of Marguerite's inability to communicate was related to the fact that nobody would be upfront with her about just what was going on with her mother's health. Both Marguerite and Joyce described situations that
happened when they were children, stressing that children experience loneliness and have no way to explain it because they do not yet have adult communication skills.

The theme of loneliness as an inability to communicate was illustrated in participants' descriptions of not talking to others. Most often, the lack of communication was presented as due to the fact that "I don't have anybody to talk to," which ultimately centers the reason for the loneliness on the other who is absent instead of on the lonely one who perhaps has not reached out. "I am lonely because nobody is there for me to talk to" is a wholly different phrase from "I am lonely because I have chosen not to talk to anybody."

The next major category is of loneliness as centered not in relationships but in individuals. Anandi suggested, in a curious bridge between the relational theme of loneliness as an inability to communicate and the following broad categories of loneliness as being centered in individuals, that lack of communication can be an individual's problem—due to an individual's personality. The perception of loneliness, therefore, originates in an individual's personal standpoint, even though poor communication is, by nature, a relational issue:

I guess to me, it doesn't matter what kind of relationship you're in, because it's a personality issue. Some people can be lonely throughout a relationship because they were not able to communicate well, or they think that somebody doesn't understand their problem.

Anandi's idea about the inability to communicate was presented as an individual fault; it is a personality issue or an issue of individual perception. Thus, her ideas about communication bridged into themes regarding loneliness as part and parcel of the self. Like Anandi, Bob articulated ideas about loneliness that bridged relational and self categories. Although Bob's
The prevalent definition of loneliness is relational, Bob knows that loneliness is something he must deal with himself, and he therefore relates loneliness to the realm of the individual. "I deal with it myself," he said, "because you can't change, I've tried this, and you just can't get that other person" to change or to be like he is. He knew that he was on his own with the feeling. The experience, therefore, he defined as relational; his dealing with it, however, necessarily is individual.

**General Loneliness is Centered in the Individual**

Respondents in this category defined loneliness as being centered not in a relationship but in an individual. Diane clearly introduced this theme of loneliness as centered in the individual in her assumption that to feel lonely is not necessarily pleasurable, but to feel lonely is to feel human: "I feel sad," she related, "and I also feel like it's almost something that you have to sort of bear up under and it's a part of being human and you need to feel it, you know, it's okay." Diane's talk indicated that feeling loneliness is part of life; it is part of being an individual human being. This general grouping suggests that loneliness stems not from a relationship but from an individual. Participants described loneliness as centered in the individual by focusing on personal choice, self-image, and lack of will to live.

**Personal Choice**

Thom suggested that loneliness occurs because of a personal choice. If people are lonely, perhaps they have made themselves lonely:

If you're lonely, a lot of times, it's your choice, because you've drawn away from people. You made a decision to do that. So in order to alleviate the sadness or the feeling alone, you've got to change that withdrawal. You've got to make yourself aware of it, do what needs to be done to drag yourself out of it. And if that means forcing yourself to
Thom's talk about loneliness suggested that loneliness is chosen and that when people decide they have had enough, they can reach out to others and connect in order to alleviate that loneliness. Thom did suggest implicitly that loneliness itself is composed partly of a scarcity of human contact; however, his emphasis on the lonely individual's ability to control the loneliness set his definition far from those in the relational category. In the relational category, loneliness is not about me; in this category, said Thom, loneliness is about me. Individual lonely people, to some extent, are therefore held responsible for their own feelings.

**Exists in Self-Image**

Participants described more focused subcategories of loneliness as being individual in that it exists in a person's self-image. Some respondents described loneliness as existing within their images of themselves or as in acknowledging their weaknesses or vulnerabilities as making them feel lonely. Rhonda stated that, at times, she feels lonely because of her personality. She picks up on other people's loneliness and feels it with them:

There were times before that, when friends would be depressed or sad, and I would take on that feeling for some reason, and it would feel real lonely, and I couldn't explain it. And I couldn't shake that feeling, you just had it.

Rhonda saw herself as an empathic person, picking up on others' loneliness, an individual characteristic that adds to her own sense of how she feels lonely. Sheila and Lorraine, as well, stated that they do not feel lonely because of their personality traits—they are both independent people.

"Lonely?" said Lorraine, "No. I'm so independent." Sheila, too, said that she
had never felt lonely because she did not perceive that she had ever needed people:

I guess because I don't really need other people to—if I think about other relationships in my life before Jim—I was 28 when I married Jim. And I was 23 when we started our romantic relationship. Up 'til that point in time, I had only one other guy that I was really serious about. And I thought I loved him, but I really didn't. And up through those first 23 years of my life, I had so many friends, a lot of whom were guys, that we just had a blast. So I never really felt alone because it was not of paramount importance to me that I was in a romantic relationship. I had enough stuff going on with parties and hangin' with my buds, I was fine.

Sheila's life and level of interaction had been fine with her, and her description of her own personality traits was of a woman who did not feel the need to feel lonely.

Anandi described her loneliness as existing in her image of herself and how that self-image affects her relationships. She described feeling lonely in her body:

[Anandi:] And to me, a lot of my loneliness was associated with looks. . . . Or feeling alone in something, like, sometimes I feel that when I'm with my friends now. I think I have a weight problem. I'm over-conscious about it. And all Indian women are small, petite women, they make you sick, they're that small. So, that's one part of me that I feel a little lonely about. I feel, I can never be small. Period. It's just the way I am. But when it comes to, talking about dresses or something, I feel alienated, because it's something I cannot connect at. That to me is lonely.

[Sharon:] If people are talking about things like shopping and dresses, you feel like you don't participate in that conversation?

[Anandi:] Or even if I participate, I'm not in there. It's not them, I'm not there. I feel totally out of the picture.

Because of her perception of her physical person, Anandi feels lonely in her self-critique. Her loneliness, as she described it, comes from her own
perceptions of self-worth as that relates to body image. It is a kind of private loneliness, painful, and stemming from a negative self-perception through social comparison.

Bernice introduced the idea that loneliness can come when people revise their self-image in the recognition of their own vulnerabilities. She suggested that she feels lonely at times when she starts to recognize parts of herself that she does not always publicize to others or to herself: "I'll get that little vulnerable glimpse of myself—I guess that's another word that maybe loneliness means. Little cracks in our shields." Bernice's idea that loneliness can come in acknowledging our own weaknesses is of loneliness as inherently individual.

Loss of Will to Live

Although it was not a major descriptor of loneliness, several respondents discussed the possibility of loneliness being an individual's loss of the desire to live. Bernice said she associated a lot of loneliness with "not having the will to live, no meaning in life." Bernice, Lewis, and several others suggested that loneliness might be related to depression and also incorporated the idea of loneliness as connected to the loss of will. These people suggested loneliness was horrible, destructive in its magnitude and force, and terrible in its association with nothingness.

The general category of loneliness as centered in the individual involved attributions of loneliness as due to individual choice, as existing in an individual's self-image, and as related to the lack of desire to live. The following major category is composed of definitions of loneliness as being centered in a particular situation.
General Loneliness is Centered in the Situation

Loneliness in this category was defined as occurring due to particular circumstances. Loneliness is not about a relationship with anyone nor is it about a person's sense of self. Rather, it simply exists on its own, intrinsic to the particular situation described by the participants. People who contributed to this category spoke of loneliness as due to particular personal associations, as connected to the unknown, and as associated with death.

Particular Associations

Some people spoke about particular personal experiences and associations that triggered loneliness. Anandi related the story of her wedding ceremony, which took place several years earlier during a time of great riots and upheaval in Bombay, India. Because of the riots, absolutely nothing went as planned for the wedding—guests could not travel because the trains and planes were stopped, the wedding rings and part of her wedding dress were at the jewelers and tailors and could not be delivered to her, everything was completely out of her control. Anandi related that, to this day, she feels lonely when people bring up weddings as topics of conversation: "When people are talking about planning their wedding, it kind of hurts me. I feel like, 'Why did this have to happen to me?' Those times, I feel very lonely." Anandi's felt loneliness was in the supreme disappointment and despair at having had the most important ceremony in her life be entirely disrupted. Similarly, Carrie said that when people talk to her about being mad with their parents, she feels lonely because both of her parents are dead:

Another time I get a sort of lonely feeling is when people gripe about parents, and I'm like, well, I'll listen to your gripe, and I don't ever say,
"You should be glad that you have parents"—but in the back of my mind it's there.

Both Anandi and Carrie feel lonely when certain topics of conversation come up, meaning that their loneliness in these instances comes directly from the particular conversation or situation and their own private and painful associations. Nobody described this kind of loneliness as being due to a personality trait—it was simply a lonely feeling associated with the remembrance of earlier lonely times or the reminder of a deeply held private loneliness, triggered in conversation.

**Associated With the Unknown**

Participants who contributed to this category related loneliness to the unknown. Rhonda noted that she feels lonely in general when she is facing major changes in her life:

[Rhonda:] When I found out I was pregnant, I was very excited and I was telling Tim about it, of course, but that was a very lonely feeling. It felt very lonely. And I don't know why. [Both laugh.] It was just like, life as we know it is no longer here, I guess.

[Sharon:] So, like, on the verge of big change?

[Rhonda:] That does it to me. Well, you just summed it up. I never thought about it that way, but yeah. On the verge of big change is when I feel that way. Mmm-hmm. I guess fear of the unknown makes you feel lonely no matter who you're with or what you're doing.

Others mentioned the unknown or facing major changes in terms of their feelings of loneliness with their partners, but Rhonda related it as an individual feeling, stemming from her own view of her life's possibilities.
Associated with Death

An unusually large number of respondents mentioned death as somehow connected to their ideas or experiences of loneliness. Whether real or hypothetical, the topic of death and dying surfaced repeatedly:

[Diane:] When my brother and my father died, that year, I think I felt loneliness and sadness and despair. That was just all entwined, I didn't know what was what. And it was a hard time for us because there's really nothing anybody can do just at that time. And, it was wonderful to be in a relationship and have that support and my family was supportive, but, you know. Especially with a suicide, you just have to have a few years to work through the guilt and get through the despair and the loneliness, and then it gets better. So. There was really nothing to be done about that. That was a pretty lonely time.

[Bob:] To me, the idea of loneliness would be if Jack died.

Even when they said they have not experienced loneliness due to death, many people mentioned death as connected to the possibility of feeling lonely. In these next examples, death was commonly discounted as a reason for feeling loneliness or was dismissed as irrelevant to the interviewee's current circumstances:

[Doug:] See, the only other thing that comes to mind is the loss that I've felt when people have died. I don't call that loneliness at all. And maybe some people would characterize it as being lonely. I think if Carrie died, I'd be really lonely. But when other people or things—I'm very attached to my cats and they are definitely people to me—when I've lost them, some of that was extremely hard to get over. But I don't call that loneliness. It's a feeling of loss that I assume some people would associate with a feeling of loneliness.

[Lewis:] Maybe when my parents pass away or something, maybe I'll feel some kind of remorse or guilt, that God, maybe I should have spent more time with them, and I really feel lonely now and miss them—but it's just kind of hard. It's not hard to think about, but I think I'll move on at some point. I equate that with I'll feel sorrow and remorse and miss my parents; I guess I don't equate that with feeling a sense of loneliness and isolation if I'm still with my wife.
[Sheila:] When my grandfather died, that was probably the hardest thing for me to take, but I didn't feel alone through that. I just felt very sad. Which I think is a totally different emotion than loneliness. It has to be really big for me to freak over it. Death, health, loss of job, you know, core kinds of things. I've been blessed that no one in my family has ever been seriously ill, and my parents are both still alive.

[Bernice:] I do view a lot of dying and death, and I don't have the answers to all these perplexing questions and I know I'm perplexed sometimes. It puts me in a, not really a lonely state, but a sad state, and it's a state that we have to try to acknowledge as well as the happy moments.

Even when participants suggested that loneliness is not about grief or mourning, they still brought it up and discounted it. Even in their dismissal, however, death is still being associated with the popular conception of loneliness.

All of the respondents in this category related loneliness to a situation outside of an individual and outside of the realm of relating. The situational triggers included personal associations, dealing with the unknown, and death.

Themes About Loneliness in Relationships

All of the previous themes were derived from interviewees' ideas of loneliness in general. The second part of this chapter deals with themes constructed from participants' responses to the question, "Have you ever felt something like what you described as loneliness in the context of your good relationship?" Several of these themes are similar to loneliness in general, but the context of the good relationship renders these answers unique because the intimate context itself often is perceived to negate the possibility of loneliness, particularly if the general loneliness is defined in relational ways (as, for example, in loneliness as a lack of human stimulus). In many
instances, the boundaries were blurred when people responded to the questions, "What does the word loneliness in general mean for you?" and "Have you ever felt something similar to what you described as loneliness inside your intimate relationship?" Some had distinct answers to the two questions; other times, some people would answer the general question in terms of their relationship; thus, from the outset, their context for both questions was always the relationship.

In this analysis, I focus only on the micro-context of individuals' responses to a question of whether loneliness has existed in their relationships. In later chapters, I raise questions about the broader social context in which these individuals are making sense of their relationship—so that these individual answers and themes are used to highlight social issues on how we come to make sense of relationships. I do not mean to suggest that the individual can be separate from the culture; for purposes of clarity, however, I first address the individual context.

Often in addressing the loneliness-within-the-relationship question, interviewees would talk about what made them feel lonely in their relationship, so that, in effect, much of the following schema is an indication of the predictors or precursors of loneliness. These precursors, however, are inherently part of a relationship. The bottom line, then, is that for many people, being in a relationship in the first place is likely to open up the possibility for some sort of loneliness. This turn is helpful to loneliness research because, as Kiefer (1980) suggests, "one solution to the problem of defining loneliness is to identify those situations that evoke it" (p. 426).

Importantly, only a small fraction of the interviewees' lives is being addressed in discussions of loneliness. They reported that most of the time,
they do not feel lonely in general or lonely in their relationships. Their honest and often poignant responses were of the rare times when they do feel lonely in their good relationships. For a majority of those interviewed, then, the following responses are from moments in their lives and do not characterize the whole of their relationships. If a person does not understand or evaluates these moments negatively, however, the impact could be felt beyond that time and space. The moments may be few, but how those moments are interpreted is important to a relationship.

Two major categories with six explanatory themes were derived from responses to the question, "Have you ever felt something like what you described as loneliness inside your good relationship?" The first major category is that relational loneliness is about relationships, which included five explanatory themes: loneliness in the relationship occurs when partners are arguing or at odds, when change is present, when feeling physical aloneness, when feeling emotional aloneness, and when other relationships serve as points of reference for the loneliness. The second major category suggests that relational loneliness is about the self, which contains two explanatory themes: relational loneliness is about personal needs, and it is associated with an individual's loss of sense of self.

Relational Loneliness is About the Relationship

The definitions in this category are that loneliness exists inside a relationship because of some factor associated with the relationship. People spoke to loneliness in this category as occurring when partners are arguing or are at odds, when change is imminent, when they are physically alone, when they are emotionally alone, and when they focus on particular relationships outside of their own as points of reference by which to gauge loneliness.
When Arguing/At Odds with Partner

Several respondents noted that they feel lonely in their relationships when they are arguing or otherwise are not "right" with their partners. As both Dot and Janice said about their respective relationships, they feel lonely in their relationships when they and their partners "don't see eye to eye." Janice articulated well the feeling of being lonely when she and her husband Larry are fighting:

You're arguing on something and you haven't come to an understanding or agreement, it's a lonely feeling to me. Because right now, I feel like things aren't together right. We are separate, and we haven't got this resolved. So I can think of that time. There's times when you're physically separated or gone when you feel lonely, to me that's a given, but in other times when we're together, even in the same house, and things just aren't right. There's something we've disagreed on, or there's something bothering one of us and we're not sure, and you feel shut out, you're not part of this, and until you communicate and get this worked out, you feel a little bit lonely. Or at least I do.

Janice explained relational loneliness as a disconnection or estrangement in a relationship that is just not supposed to be disconnected. Diane, as well, suggested the experience of loneliness as estrangement, especially when she and her partner, Bernice, are fighting: "In terms of our relationship, I feel lonely when we're estranged and we're not connecting or we've hurt each other, or when we're not talking—that's lonely." Many people explained loneliness as occurring because their good relationship was temporarily jarred by disagreement. This was one of the most common forms of relational loneliness that I encountered in this analysis.

Doug went beyond the momentary fight and indicated that most of the times in his relationship when he felt lonely were times when the relationship was not going well overall. He suggested he did not feel lonely
"during the time when I would classify it as a good relationship." Although the presence of loneliness was not always directly linked to the relational climate, more people were able to indicate times of loneliness when they perceived they were not doing well in their overall relationship than when they perceived they were doing well.

Maria suggested that relational loneliness exists because there are good times and bad times simply because relationships are not perfect. In her suggestion, loneliness is connected to the bad times in relationships:

[Maria:] There are some bad times. A good relationship is not made of joy days everyday, it's not Merry Christmas, there are bad things, and you start thinking about them. There are some days that aren't that good, and there are some things you don't want. Some things happen when you want to go one way but you have to think of your relationship and the other person, not just you.

[Sharon:] Does that feel lonely to you?

[Maria:] You feel like you are in a good relationship and you feel kind of bad because you don't feel well and you're looking for the reason about what's causing that. Can the relationship fill my needs? Nothing's perfect.

Most people mentioned in their interviews that they did not expect the relationship always to be perfect—that part of any relationship is the ups and downs. However, many people might, in fact, desire more ups than downs in relationships and feel bad or lonely when they are in a relational downturn. By many people's personal definitions, being in a committed relationship implies an expectation that the relationship will last forever. When arguments or disagreements happen, there's a disruption of that ideal and perhaps even a questioning of whether the relationship will last forever. Cognitive knowledge that no relationship is perfect all the time still does not
seem to protect most people from feeling unsure or sad or disappointed when that relationship is imperfect in its intimate connection.

Janice articulated how she feels whenever Larry does not understand her. Her narrative introduced the idea that she feels lonely precisely because she and Larry are so close. Typically, they share so much and consider themselves to be in a wonderful intimate connection. The contrast, therefore, when they fight, is a jarring one for Janice:

I have to analyze the situation because we’re not in sync right now and decide whether or not to approach him. If I feel he doesn’t understand, then it makes me feel lonely. Because we’re so close, if we’re not in sync on everything, then I feel not a part of it, I don’t feel as close together. So I don’t know what the word is, but I would best describe it as loneliness. Which is sad. And being uncomfortable.

Janice and Larry’s satisfying everyday intimacy perhaps serves as a baseline for her relational needs. If she rarely felt “in sync” with Larry, perhaps Janice would not feel so acutely lonely during these particular times when he does not understand her feelings.

Both Janice and Marguerite suggested that the loneliness they feel when their partners are mad at them is even worse than the traditional sort of loneliness due to not being in a relationship. Marguerite said that when her husband, Lewis, is mad at her, that’s bad enough, but she also considers Lewis a friend: "And it’s your best friend, so it’s even worse," she relates.

The intimate relationship, after all, is supposed to prevent loneliness. Several respondents, notably only women, suggested that feeling lonely inside a good relationship is worse than feeling it in the traditional sense. Portions of Janice’s narrative help illustrate this theme:

It’s even scarier when you’re in a good relationship because your emotion is even stronger. You know, "My gosh, now, my best friend . .
And the fact that we don’t have time to do tons of things with friends, we do it with each other.

Janice and Marguerite both suggested that relational loneliness is worse than everyday loneliness because it occurs in a friendship as well as an intimate relationship.

All of the people who contributed to this category defined relational loneliness as occurring when they were fighting or otherwise at odds with their partners—when things were not going smoothly in the relationship.

Associated with Change

These comments concerned the feeling of loneliness that exists within a relationship when change is imminent. Tim, for instance, worried that he might feel lonely in his relationship when the baby that he and his wife, Rhonda, are expecting arrives. He saw a big change coming and predicted loneliness because of that change. In his interview, he reflected more on the imminent change than on the concrete manifestations of that change: he more often commented on the change itself rather than on Rhonda’s potential distance from him as she gave herself over to the baby. Laurie’s comments also reflect the idea that it is not always the content of the change that gives way to loneliness but change itself:

[Laurie:] I hate change. We lived in our apartment for six years. I remember the time when we were looking for a house, and I was, I didn’t want to move! I did, because we needed more space and we needed to have a feeling of belonging, but still, it was change. And he doesn’t do change well, either, he was like, "Fine, we’ll stay in the apartment." I’m like, "No no no." I remember crying for days—every day I would cry about leaving. And yet, the people who lived next door to us were fighting all the time, and I was just so glad to get out of there, but it was just, again, the whole change thing. I always feel lonely at change time. I remember all those times I told you about—elementary to junior high, junior high to high school—although I probably felt better about that because I was closer to home—then
college and post-graduate work and here. I remember even, on our wedding day—again, you have a change—and feeling a kind of loneliness because I was like, it was just weird. But it was a very emotional time, my friends were all there, my college friends I hadn't seen for a while, but even that day, just that loneliness inside, because I thought, "My whole life is changing at this point." So you know, you can just pick them out, those times in your life. . . . I remember thinking my relationship with my parents is going to be different. My life is changing, I'm going into the unknown. I never ever thought, "Am I making the right decision?" That was never the issue. But it was just the change.

Imminent change brings with it deep feelings of loneliness for some people.

Change brings with it, for many people, a certain sense of personal loss of control. Carrie said that she did not feel lonely very often in her marriage to Doug but that the closest experience she could relate was a loss of control. For Carrie, the loneliness was exacerbated by her inability to stop it, so it fed on itself. She may have been lonely anyway, but her own recognition that she could not control it made her loneliness feel even more significant to her. Like Carrie, Kathryn commented that she feels lonely when she feels out of control of her own life. Her loneliness, however, was tinged with guilt at her assumption that she could—perhaps should—be able to change her own situation that caused the loneliness in the first place. She spends a lot of individual time with her partner and very little time with her friends and sees her intimate relationship and her friendships in an "either/or" light: either she is a good intimate partner, or she is a good friend. Her connection and extensive time commitments to her partner surfaced in feelings of loneliness that she related to her own sense of control:

Out of control. I don't have control over my life. Everybody else is directing it but me. But yet these are all things that I've committed to and agreed to do. I don't have control, and I end up complaining about that to my friends. "I just don't have time to talk, I have to do this and
this and I'm out of control." I feel like I've made the choice and the obligation to do different things, I feel that now I'm stuck doing it. I use that as an excuse, that I'm not spending time with my friends, and I regret it. It's usually when all those things build up when I think, "Wow, I have no control over my life. I'm so lonely because I can't choose these different relationships."

Kathryn expressed great dissonance because even as she expressed a feeling of being lonely and out of control, she also recognized what she perceived on some level as her own choices.

The loneliness as associated with a loss of control was not always perceived negatively; several people mentioned lack of control in more positively charged situations. Mallika, for example, indicated that she was happy but was also overwhelmed with all of the changes she recently had made in her life. In response to the question of whether she had ever felt lonely in the context of her good relationship, she replied:

Definitely. I think a lot more than, because also I think, after you get married, there's a phase of transition where you have to get used to a person, a person's lifestyle. We got married, and we never lived together until we moved to Chicago, which was a year and a half later. And so, everytime we met, it was a brief meeting for two days, and so we were both being excessively nice. It was quality time, and we kept everything else aside—because it was like, you get to see him once every five weeks, let's not screw up this time. You know? So I think when we first moved in together, the first couple months was just hard in that we were adjusting to each other. And we had all the stupid arguments most couples have. But I never felt the loneliness of the kind you're describing. No. I think it was volatile, initially, because we had all these pent-up feelings—on the one hand, we were really happy because we were finally living together, but, on the other hand, we were making all these big changes in our lives. We were out of graduate school, we were professionals, it was just too many things at the same time. But that was just for a few months.

Mallika indicated both the temporary nature of this loneliness and also indicated that she did not feel wholly negative about the experience. Even so,
she attributed her lonely feelings to the loss of control as she underwent major changes.

Associated with uncertainty. Inherently related to the notion of change is the idea of uncertainty. Some of the people who discussed their aversion to change may have had underlying concerns about uncertainty, although they did not mention it directly. Some people, however, explicitly mentioned that uncertainty was related to their feeling lonely. When they no longer felt certain about their relationship, they felt lonely. These participants explained that their relationship is generally good—but they also explained a recognition that a good relationship is not always good. Even so, they questioned their relationship; when they started questioning, they felt lonely. Maria indicated earlier in her interview that she did not expect any relationship to be perfect. But she felt lonely when she started to question it and her life in general:

You feel that you are very happy with life in general, but you sometimes stop and start questioning, is this really what I want with my life? Am I happy with my career and everything? You stop and think.

Maria perceives her times of questioning her own decisions as lonely times. Betsy described times of questioning the meaning of her life—"What is my life going to be?"

Certainly, many of the things that I went through during the time when we were under treatment for infertility and I was trying to get pregnant definitely caused me to feel very sad and alone and lost, even though I knew without question that Greg was absolutely there for me and very caring and concerned and expressing his love and support. And I don't think I've ever felt closer to him, but internally I was feeling very lonely and isolated and alone. About two months after that, I learned that I had conceived triplets and then lost all three babies. I collapsed completely. Physically, emotionally. And felt probably as helpless as I've ever felt in my adult life. And I really don't know how I would have gotten through that period without Greg. But
it was an intensely lonely time for me. A lot of it was connected with
mourning. But it was also a time of crisis about what my professional
life was all about, what was important to me. One of these major
questions about life—what is my life going to be?

Betsy reiterated her questioning stance as a time of loneliness; so many
inexplicable things happened to her that she ended up questioning
everything in her life, from her relationship with her husband to her
relationship with God, and in her questioning came a profound loneliness.

For Kathryn, her uncertainty involved the future. She felt lonely
because her nontraditional relationship has no stated assumed shared future:

We've chosen different ways of dealing with our relationship. At
those times, I feel kind of melancholy and oh—not as deep as remorse—I
guess melancholy is a good way to look at it. Kind of like regret, but
not really. [Like bittersweet?] Maybe. That we're not going to get
married, we're not going to do these traditional things, I can't really
say, like maybe somebody else would, that forty years from now we're
going to definitely still be together, whereas somebody in a marriage
will think, "Oh, well, of course we'll be together unless we get a
divorce." Well, since we don't have that legal boundary, I guess, we're
more pragmatic in saying, "Well, who knows if we're going to really be
together? We don't plan to be separate. But I can't really say."... I'm
not in a relationship like everybody else. We do handle it differently,
we've accepted that, but it's not like everybody else. It's different.
Nothing in life is sure. I guess it kind of brings attention to that.

Kathryn's loneliness lay in her uncertainty about a shared future with her
partner and perhaps in an uncertainty of his desire for the relationship.

Anandi's explanation of her uncertainty about her husband's potential
response to a hypothetical situation contained similar overtones:

When one of my friends had trouble trying to conceive, she would talk
about how she felt, like how the relationship was deteriorating, and
she talked to me and I tried to put it into perspective by saying, "If that
were to happen to me, will Rustam accept me?" And I thought, I don't
know. Those are times when I don't feel lonely, but I feel weird, and I
feel like I don't know this guy. And I look at him and think, do I really
know him? It's like a sudden panic attack, and then it goes away. But there are times.

Anandi said in her narrative that questioning whether or not Rustam would accept her if she were unable to have children was not a lonely time but a weird time. In the course of her three-hour interview, Anandi most often addressed questions of loneliness with long stories that would end with a disclaimer that she did not feel lonely in those times. The stories, somehow, though, if not exactly on the mark for her definition were significant enough for her to relate in the discussion on loneliness. They were significantly tied to her experience of loneliness even if she could not nail down those situations precisely as pertaining to loneliness.

Not all participants who questioned their relationships had a negative value attached to the questioning. Bernice, for instance, indicated that her loneliness is a time for self-reflection. "It's not negative, necessarily," she stated, "more of just questions I cannot answer." While she felt loneliness in that uncertainty, she defined it differently from the previous commentator because she did not assign negative value to her questions.

One interesting sub-theme to change and uncertainty involved childbirth and children. At least five respondents related their loneliness to issues of pregnancy or childbearing. Betsy felt terribly lonely when she could not conceive children. She felt lonely again after a difficult conception and subsequent miscarriage of triplets. She felt loneliness not only from her husband but from the relationships with her babies that were sundered when she miscarried. Dot mentioned her children when she was describing feelings of loneliness:
And mainly when my son was sick, [my husband] could go to bed and sleep, of course, I had to stay up, which I was up every night for a whole week. And, he had the mumps, and they just absolutely was not getting better. We was about ready to put him in the hospital. And in the middle of the night, I'd just sit in the chair, and I'd just sit there, and you feel like nobody, nobody's there. And I think that if you have somebody who stays right with you, you feel a bit better. But that's what you feel. And I think it's lonely. You just feel like you oughta have somebody with you.

Dot's loneliness perhaps stemmed partly from feelings of sole responsibility for her sick child and from a sense of loss at not being able to help him; she focused both on her husband's physical absence as well as her implicit uncertainty that her child would recover.

Understanding Lorraine's connection to her children triggers lonely feelings for Joyce, who then recalled that she recently had a hysterectomy and therefore knows for sure that she'll never bear children:

So that might be kind of a lonely—and it makes me think, I'm never going to give birth, I'm never going to have children. Do I really want to? No. Was I ever meant to? No, I wasn't. So, and now, it's not an option. So that's never anything—but mentally I'll still go through that little game sometimes.

Even though Joyce stated that she did not want to have children, seeing the connection Lorraine has with hers seems to underscore for Joyce both the absence of connection with Lorraine as well as the absence of connection that she might have had if she had decided to have children.

These respondents described loneliness as connected to change, feeling out of control, and uncertainty. When these situations were associated with children and childbirth, the resulting loneliness was particularly poignant for these participants.
Physical Aloneness

Being physically alone was noted quite often as being related to loneliness. Thom, for instance, said he feels lonely in his relationship with Victor when he's by himself a lot. When he is physically separated from Victor, he feels lonely. Likewise, in an earlier quote by Bob, he indicated that his general definition of loneliness was not about being alone but that his experience of loneliness involved being alone when "being alone" was not balanced with enough time together:

I really was lonely because I really was alone. And. (Catching himself, laughing.) But I just said that wasn't my definition of lonely. [That's okay.] But do you know what I mean? [Yeah.] I was alone too much. That was a really awful time. That was really, literally being alone so much. I had too much alone time. I think it's real important to have alone time for every couple. I think people need to have alone time. And I need a lot of it, actually. And I get a lot of it, I get as much as I need. But then I had too much. I had too much time alone.

Bob's interview highlighted the tension that was present in many people's interviews—the stated assumption that being alone is not the same thing as being lonely and the simultaneous recognition that they did often feel lonely when they were physically alone. Mallika, as well, indicated that when she and her husband were living apart, she was lonely:

The time I really felt lonely within the relationship was when for a couple of years we were living apart, and I was at Chicago at graduate school and he was at Purdue. So we would meet maybe once every four weeks or once in five weeks. I think that's the time I was lonely within the relationship because of physical distance and because of the way we communicate.

Their distance/separation was compounded by the fact that she and her husband use the phone for different purposes:
I can communicate really well on the phone, but Jitender can't. To Jitender, a phone is a utility device. You use the phone to give a message. And that was very hard.

Mallika's attempts to circumvent their physical separation by relying on the phone obviously did not work for her, which served to increase her loneliness at their separation. The physical distance, however, was the reason for these people's lonely feelings.

Larry indicated that his relational loneliness only occurs when Janice is absent. In fact, Janice's absence prompted him to commit to the relationship. He felt lonely for a particular woman, Janice, and his loneliness was due to her absence:

Once in a while, Janice will go down and spend the night with her mother and father and come back the next day. And that's the loneliest night in the world for me. We'd been seeing each other for about two years, and she went to a conference and was gone for three days, and while she was gone, that was the loneliest time I think I've ever experienced. When she came back, I asked her to marry me.

Larry differentiated loneliness in general from how he feels loneliness with Janice. The kind of loneliness he feels with Janice has more of a positive turn to it than loneliness in general because when he feels it within the context of his relationship, he takes it as a reminder of how good the relationship truly is:

[Sharon:] Have you ever felt any of those ways that you described as lonely ways inside your good relationship?

[Larry:] Only when she's gone. Only then. Well, it was not frustrating, and it was not bad. It was a time to reflect on how lucky I was. And sometimes, you don't really contemplate your current situation and how lucky you are, and then she goes down for an overnight to her mom's or she goes to a conference. It was lonesome, but it wasn't frustrating and it wasn't hurtful. It just made you realize how really, really, really great being with her is.

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Sharon: Did you call that feeling loneliness or something different?

Larry: I don't know if it was as much loneliness as it was just missing her. I think it was probably more just missing her. I mean, I was lonely because I like being with her. And when I'm not with her, I want to be with her. So I guess that's a type of loneliness, isn't it? [I would say so.] But it's not anywhere near the type of loneliness that I experienced with my first marriage.

Larry associated his loneliness with his love and devotion for Janice. His occasional loneliness, then, in his view, is not always a bad experience; as with all of the other respondents in this theme, however, his loneliness only happens in his partner's physical absence.

**Emotional Aloneness**

Several people talked about relational loneliness as when they are psychologically or emotionally separate from their partners. Bob feels like loneliness is similar in some ways to boredom:

> To me, it's, it's boring. When I want to do something and he's sitting there reading and is totally in a book, you know, or we're at different places, where I have a lot higher energy level when he is low.

Bob felt distanced from Jack when they were in different places, and he associated that disconnection with boredom. Victor described relational loneliness almost as if the two of them were existing in parallel universes. He and his partner, Thom, could be in the same room, but "we're not in the same space. Most of the time we do occupy the same space. But there are times when we just don't." Finally, Esther also commented on feeling separate from her husband when, in trying to explain her feelings of loneliness, he stated that "anybody that's kept busy don't get bored or lonely."

In separate interviews, partners Lorraine and Joyce talked about feeling lonely due to emotional separation when Lorraine is sick. Lorraine gets
depressed and withdraws. Joyce discussed how Lorraine emotionally exits when she is sick and, as Lorraine withdraws—even though that withdrawl has nothing to do with Joyce or the relationship but is due to Lorraine's own attempts to deal with her disease—Joyce feels lonely:

Sometimes it feels lonely when she's sick, when she's not feeling well. Then it feels cold because she withdraws and I'm real sensitive to the energy she gives off or other people give off, that's important to me, to feel warm and safe just to have some good energy coming in. She withdraws, so she doesn't communicate, she doesn't give off warm energy and I feel, the way I feel cornered is I can't go to a lot of people for help.

Lorraine, as well, indicated that she sees when she withdraws from Joyce, but she feels like she cannot help it. When she is is sick from chronic fatigue, she protects herself by drawing inside—and away from Joyce. All of the definitions of relational loneliness in this category involved emotional distancing and were evidenced in discussions of the recognition that emotional separation is inherent in human connection (can't be the other person) and that it occurs when communication is impeded (we cannot talk).

Cannot be the other. One sub-theme related to emotional aloneness is the recognition, articulated by Laurie, that an intimate partner "can only get so close, they can't be you." One implicit conception in this category is that the ideal relationship is so close that the two people are "like one." When a person discovers that there are boundaries or chasms or differences that cannot be crossed and experiences that simply cannot be shared, the ideal is disrupted. An exchange with Laurie illustrates well the poignancy of this kind of loneliness:

[Laurie:] And maybe, in the sense that loneliness is my problem, it's not anything to do with the relationship. Does that make sense? It's things going on inside that I can't help. You can only get so close to
someone, and they can't be you or anything like that. . . . Sometimes I think you don't—I think he knows me really well, he probably knows me better than I think, but sometimes I don't think he knows me, my very very innermost, very very most innermost, you know, like what my fears are—I'm not even sure I want to know what my fears are—I just tend to block it out. But I don't think he knows what I'm really truly scared of. He could probably sit down and figure it out, but do you know what I'm saying? Those really innermost deep thoughts that I don't think anyone knows. Not even my—I don't even know if my good friends do. And they know me well. You know, I don't want to touch that area right now in my life.

[Sharon:] I was just reminded of something you said earlier—about he can't be you.

[Laurie:] Right.

[Sharon:] And maybe that's part of it, too. That inherent

[Laurie:] Right. He just can't have had the experiences that I've had. I can't be him—you know what I'm saying? But I feel like I know him probably better than he knows me. Does that make sense? [Sharon: Yes. That makes sense in a lot of ways.] I think I'm more emotional about things. He gets emotionally involved, but that's different. He doesn't react the same way I do to things. . . . I think that's the part where in a relationship you could feel lonely. [Crying.] If they can't—what's the word?—touch you inside. When Leia told me about this [research study], I just felt like, I understand how you would feel lonely in a relationship. I just knew it was that empty feeling again. No one else can, they can't be you, and they can't experience what you go through. And I think that's where it's the lonely part. So, does that make sense?

[Sharon:] It really makes sense. And I think it's not incompatible with a good relationship. [Laurie: Right.] It's almost like you feel it because you're able to do a relationship so well. I really think that a lot of times feelings like the one you're describing come from being good communicators and being good at relationships, because if you weren't good at a relationship, you wouldn't know what this feeling is like. You wouldn't have it because you wouldn't have the good stuff that makes this feeling come about.

[Laurie:] I know exactly what you mean.
[Sharon:] But it doesn't make the pain—maybe pain's not the right word—but it's really touching to feel this sense of, this tiny part of me, that

[Laurie:] no one can touch. Because you can't explain it to somebody. I told him, I can't explain how I'm feeling. You know? Just the whole uncertainty of what's going to happen. I can come across as confident and people think I'm so confident but inside I'm thinking, I test myself, and I'm so unsure. And to Zach I come across as being so sure. And so successful and whatever. And inside I'm thinking I don't really feel that way. And that's the part that he doesn't even see. Does that make sense? All he sees is what I've done and not what I feel, and those are two different things. And that's where I think he doesn't know me or even some of my other friends, maybe I don't share it with them, or they argue with me—you know what I'm saying?

Laurie's vision of herself and her husband as distinct individuals fueled for her a strong sense of being alone, which in turn she cited as the reason for her felt loneliness. Her vision that they only can be so close was terribly painful for her, and her loneliness in that vision was clear.

Anandi brought up a subject of feeling alone emotionally in her talk about the gender divide between her and her husband. The source of her loneliness is that he does not understand her—and the reason he does not understand her, in her view, is because he is male:

In the beginning of the relationship, there were a lot of things that I thought, "He just can't understand how I feel." Then when there are some things involved in just being a female, which guys don't understand, I do tend to think he doesn't understand.

Anandi's gender separation from her husband is not likely to change. There is not a lot that can be done to change loneliness if it is attributed to a gender gap. The inevitability, then, of their emotional separation, perhaps fuels the loneliness already present in their disconnection. They never will be like each other or totally understand each other because one partner is female and the other male.
We cannot talk. Another way that respondents indicated that they felt emotionally alone in their relationship was in their discussion that they could not talk to their partners. Respondents felt lonely when, like Janice, they felt "shut out" or when, like Marguerite, they felt like they were being given "the silent treatment." All the respondents in this category somehow indicated that their disconnected communication was the reason for their sense of emotional aloneness, which in turn explained their feelings of loneliness.

Feelings of loneliness in the inability of the partners to communicate were manifest in different styles of communicating (Joyce) and in different levels of perceived necessity to communicate (Rhonda):

[Joyce:] I usually feel, when I try and logic something out with her, because she can outlogic me. Because we use her form of logic, and most people can out-maneuver me that way.

[Rhonda:] Sometimes I get a feeling similar to that when Tim doesn't talk about his experience at work. He doesn't talk as much as I do. He doesn't open up as much about work. And sometimes that makes me feel shut out. He'll go over to his mother's if I'm traveling for several days—he always goes over there to eat because he's not going to cook for himself—and when we get together the next time, she'll say, "Didn't you tell Rhonda about this?" And he didn't tell me about it. "Oh, I forgot." And sometimes I have that feeling of being shut out. Just occasionally. Not dramatic, but occasionally. He doesn't feel the need to repeat things. And that aggravates! Because I would, in a heartbeat. But he does it anyway. And I tell him everything.

Joyce feels that different communication styles affect her own feelings of loneliness. She related feeling unable to participate in the conversation in a way that suggested she could not defend herself—she could be "outmaneuvered" in conversation. Rhonda spoke about her partner's inability or non-desire to communicate as contributing to her loneliness; she
expressed a hurtful feeling of loneliness when Tim does not communicate with her in the way that she communicate with him.

Laurie's narrative again illustrated emotional aloneness but also illustrated the subtheme relating to communication. She sometimes chooses not to talk to Tim because of her understanding of how he will hear her:

[Sharon:] When those things happen, do you talk with Tim about that?

[Laurie:] Yeah, but he gets upset, he gets too emotionally involved in it. . . . He doesn't talk to me about how he feels, he reacts, he wants to protect me. And things like that. Where I really want someone who just—even my friends who are really more level headed about it and can work through it—he wants to react and solve it. . . . So I just, he really tries hard, but I think that's a difference between males and females and how they see things. He reacts. So sometimes I don't talk to him about it because I'm afraid he's going to get upset and try to solve it for me, and it doesn't need to be solved the way he would solve it. So I really don't want someone to solve my problems; I can solve them. I just need someone to listen. I think he knows sometimes he doesn't, I told you, he gets mad at me if I don't tell him things that are bothering me. But I don't know sometimes how he's going to react, so I don't want to have that kind of argument with him or whatever. I just kind of keep things inside. And then I start crying and have an emotional attack. [She laughs.] He's like, "Why don't you tell me about these things?" He also talks so much, he says, "Sometimes I don't give you a chance to talk and tell me what's going on." But that's just how he is. And I've always been a listener in relationships, I don't always tell people things, I always seem to be the person people come to and talk about things going on with them, but I'm not always the person to share when it's really too much. Does that make sense?

Laurie's loneliness, as she described it, is partly self-imposed because she chooses not to talk to her husband, Tim. Somehow, though, she senses that she may be lonely in whatever choice she makes because if she does tell him, chances are he would not understand, anyway. Nilash, like Laurie, made a choice not to talk to his partner, Shravini, about an intensely stressful job
search because she would constantly express her fears about the situation. But he felt lonely in that choice, too:

In terms of our relationship, yes, that's the one case where it came to a point where I couldn't express my frustrations about the job because I realized that even though Shravini was listening, it was only adding to her frustration. She was getting scared. It was adding to her fears about the future. And then she wasn't being supportive. And it was not that she didn't want to, but she didn't realize she wasn't being supportive—she would express her fears back to me, and the way it came across to me was, it only added to my frustrations. "Did you hear from someone? Oh, my God, I hope you get a job. Do you think you'll get a job? How does it look? Have you applied to any other places?" And so she was trying to be supportive in that way, but in a way, she was expressing her fear. And then it came to a point where I wouldn't tell you what I'm feeling about my job situation. To some extent, you are not being being true, because I'm likely to say, 'I'll work something out. I know something's going to happen." But it's never the pessimism that is underlying that expression. I wouldn't express it. And there is a degree of loneliness in that experience. There are times that I felt, I wish I could just put it to you the way it is. And that you wouldn't suffer from that as you are.

Nilash's explanation was that he felt loneliness because he could not share his experiences as he wished, and Shravini's responses to his earlier attempts had been unsupportive. He indicated he felt lonely both in his earlier attempts to talk—which had been met with unsupportive communication—and in his decision not to tell her how he was really feeling.

Joyce offered an important twist on this theme, and that is that she feels lonely when she cannot support her partner. Part of her experience of loneliness when Lorraine is sick is that Lorraine withdraws; the other part of the experience for Joyce is that Joyce perceives she cannot help Lorraine: "If she's more emotionally distraught, and I don't know what to do. I just don't have, I feel, the insight or the depth to do what I think is really helpful."
Doug, as well, echoed this theme in his feeling helpless to comfort his wife when she was grieving for her mother:

[Doug:] Those were some difficult times to get through, not knowing how to deal with Carrie's sense of loss, not knowing how to deal with my sense of loss, not knowing how to deal with the feelings of guilt of I have two living parents, and now my wife's both are dead. Forgiving yourself for thinking, God, why couldn't it have been one of mine? So, that would be definitely one time during our good relationship where, if you asked us right in the middle of it, we probably would have said we were lonely.

[Sharon:] Did you describe those times as lonely times?

[Doug:] Painful times. Times of self-denial, times of trying to make someone else feel better when she didn't want to feel better. Times of not having any clue of what in the world to do. A time of having to decide that I don't have to feel the same way as my spouse. That wasn't, that seems such an obvious statement. You go through your life going "Hmm, they're having a bad day" to general people that you meet. Well, my idea of marriage was, the good ol' Barry Manilow song, "Can't Smile Without You"—"When you feel sad, I feel sad." [Laughs.] Cause it's such a nice tune. And realizing that, you know, it can be her problem. We can still be in a loving, caring relationship and I don't have to be sympathetic, I can be empathetic. That was very difficult to learn. So that would be a time, feelings of loss, and certainly loss to a lot of people equates to loneliness.

Doug and others who contributed to this theme indicated that their sense of separation was heightened when their partner was in need, and they could not fix it. They felt lonely both with their partners as well as in the knowledge that they did not have the power to make their partners feel better.

The theme of loneliness as emotional aloneness, therefore, entailed a sense of emotional separation that occurred when partners recognized their own intrinsic separation and when they felt they could not communicate.
Other Relationships as Points of Reference

Many respondents indicated that they felt loneliness (or not) inside their relationship over against some other relationships that were important in their lives. They looked outside their intimate relationship and based their understandings of loneliness in their relationships as dependent on outside relationships. Laurie said she occasionally felt lonely in her marriage, but these times were not due to the marriage itself but were times of loneliness that were about other people in her life:

[Laurie:] Have there been times in my good relationship that I have felt lonely?

[Sharon:] Mmm-hmm. When you knew it was a good relationship and that wasn't in question, and you had feelings similar to the feelings you described?

[Laurie:] I know I have. And I'm trying to think. I think it's times when things weren't going well at work, when it had nothing to do with the relationship, because I have not felt that at all ever in our marriage. But it could be that I miss my parents, or I'm trying to think of some other things, the death of my grandparents, losing people, losing friends. Changes in a job. I think that's where I've felt lonely. Things that are going on around me with other people.

When "things are going on around [Laurie] with other people" is when she feels lonely in her marriage. In making this attribution, Laurie took her own relationship off the hook and pointed elsewhere as the reason for her feelings. Similarly, Diane felt lonely inside her relationship with Bernice because a good friendship had ended. Even though that friendship had nothing necessarily to do with Bernice, she still felt loneliness in her connection with Bernice.

Most often the other relationships that people felt contributed to their intimate relational loneliness were friendships. Among others, Marguerite,
Maria, Esther, and Wanda illustrated this theme in their suggestions of loneliness as occurring due to a lack of community. Both Maria and Marguerite moved to a new city—in Maria’s case, a new country—in order to be with their husbands but had terribly mixed feelings about their experiences:

[Maria:] But the situation of coming here. I’m here because he’s here, and it’s important for me that I am here with him. But if I were alone, I wouldn’t be here. There are a lot of good things, but there are bad things that are temporary. A sense of feeling like I’m empty and I don’t feel like I’m doing what I should be doing in the career and in life. . . . Roberto goes to school and I spend all the day and its 11:00 pm and he’s not back and it’s like, "I’m here because of him and he spent all the day and all the night outside. It’s not fair."

[Sharon:] Did you feel those lonely ways when you were in Colombia and he was here?

[Maria:] Yeah, kind of, but there was easier because I was more familiar in my environment, I had my job, my friends, my family and I missed Roberto a lot, but it was easy there. I was going to see him soon. You are always an alien. You have to explain yourself everywhere—"Where are you from?"—when you are there, in Colombia, you don’t have to explain. You don’t have to think, "I wish I could talk more and say the things better."

[Sharon:] It seems like some of the things we’re talking about are largely situational. You’re in another country, in another culture. Do you feel like that factor is touching your relationship?

[Maria:] Yeah, somehow. We try not to, but there is a point where—the reason I’m here is the relationship with him. And when you don’t feel very good, well, the reason I’m here is the relationship, then the relationship is guilty. Or—not the relationship—Roberto is guilty that I’m here! [They laugh.]

Maria felt disconnected from her entire community, her family, her friends and is in a situation that requires her to simply wait for Roberto. She described her loneliness as affecting her relationship with Roberto—but the
loneliness was for other relationships that she had left behind. Marguerite had a similar experience in moving across country to be with her husband, Lewis:

[Sharon:] Some of those ways that you described to me as lonely ways. Have you ever felt something similar to that in the context of your good relationship?

[Marguerite:] I guess, yeah, I'm sure, I have. Maybe not to the degree of those feelings. But, I'm trying to think of an example. Like when we first moved to Chicago. And Lewis was going into medical school. And when you go in, you've got a bunch of people in the same boat. And you probably all just moved here or something. So he had an instant infrastructure of friends in the same boat. I would say that was certainly a time when I was, geez, he's got all those people, and I'm looking for a job. And basically I'm looking for a job that can support both of us. The pressure, that was just a bad time. That was probably a lonely time. We had made this an adventure together—we made a conscious decision to go together. So at that time I was feeling those kinds of things.

[Sharon:] Did you at the time call that loneliness?

[Marguerite:] Yeah, I probably did. I know I did. I remember talking to him about it. Maybe not in the depth that I really should have. But I remember telling him, "I don't have any friends. And you can go to school and you have people and I'm out looking for a job." So.

[Sharon:] Did that seem connected to your relationship?

[Marguerite:] It did in the fact that he brought me here. Doggone it! I followed him, "Why did I do that, I had a good job," you know. So certainly it was connected to the relationship in that I was there with him and I chose to do that. I was going, "Why did I do this?"

Both Marguerite and Maria talked about their loneliness as being focused on their decision to be with their husbands. They both expressed the idea that they chose to do so and, even so, felt resentment and loneliness in their situation—both of which were focused on their husbands. Again, the lack of
outside friendships and a sense of community were the reasons they described for their loneliness in their relationship.

Wanda and Esther both referenced feeling constrained in their relationships with others after they got married. Esther spoke a lot about her loneliness as stemming from a stunted network of friends. Her husband disapproved of most people with whom Esther wanted to be friends, and she blamed him for it. She felt like she was missing out on intimate connection, and she did not like it. She said, however, that she does not feel intensely lonely now because she has gotten used to her lack of outside connections.

Wanda remembered clearly her lonely, frustrated attempts to make friends:

[Sharon:] Can you recall a time inside your good relationship when you felt similarly to the ways you described as loneliness—not connecting, not communicating, feeling not cared for—even as you knew the relationship was good. Have there ever been moments like that?

[Wanda:] I think so. The times that I mentioned like when he wouldn't be friends with other people. Too high class or too low—it never seemed like there was a happy medium.

Both Wanda and Esther expressed a desire for relationships outside their marriages, desires that neither husband afforded credibility. Kathryn, as well, said that she feels like she has had to choose between having friends and having a relationship with her partner, Mike; her relationship precludes having other friends.

Joyce described feeling lonely when her partner, Lorraine, was being visited by her grown children and grandchildren for reasons that are not entirely clear to her but that may result from feeling Lorraine’s emotional energy is being spent on others:
Another mild example might be when her kids are around. I don't know whether it is that I get attention deficit asshole-itis or whether it's a natural thing, but she would say sometimes I'll get weird when the kids are around. And I try real hard when the kids are around to leave her and her kids and give them time together and be supportive and nice and not be that demanding kind of 'need me, look at me, tell me you love me' kind of person, and yet, from her, I get that I still do some of that.

For Joyce, then, her experience of loneliness with Lorraine occurs occasionally because of the presence of others—notably, Lorraine's children. Joyce's self-reflexive remark indicated that her loneliness with Lorraine is based on outside relationships that take Lorraine away.

Others are lonely, I'm not. Many people first judged whether or not they feel lonely in their relationships by focusing on other people outside the relationship as their focal point and baseline for loneliness. Both Bernice and Anandi said they do not perceive themselves as ever being lonely because they have seen intense loneliness—and they have never been affected to that degree:

[Bernice:] I see a lot of people who are lonely who will admit it, socially isolated, in depression, physical components and so forth. I see them suffer like that. But because I see the severity of loneliness, I don't see myself experiencing that. So maybe I'm just, I see severe loneliness, I don't see myself in that kind of loneliness. I have not experienced that loneliness. [I believe that.] Not to say that I have not, but because I work with people that are. So it's like saying that I'm never sick because I work with people who are dying of an illness. Of course I'm sick. So, of course, I've been lonely, but it's because maybe I've been comparing it to those experiences of loneliness. Do I experience that? Not like that.

[Anandi:] I have friends who have problems within their relationship. They're extremely lonely, and they talk to me about it. Even if I say I'm lonely, it's not real loneliness because I've seen how bad it can get. I feel like I'm just overplaying the issue; it's not bad at all. I think it's all comparative, it's all relative, you think something's really bad and then you see something worse.
Their own perceptions of whether or not they have felt lonely in their relationships was balanced on their personal knowledge of others who had been severely lonely; therefore, their perceptions of their own experiences of relational loneliness were, in part, affected by other people against whose lives they compared their own.

In sum, people indicated that their relational loneliness was about relationships in five major ways: they spoke of loneliness as occurring when arguing or at odds with their partners, when change is imminent, when feeling physically alone, when feeling emotionally alone, and when basing understanding of relational loneliness on relationships outside of the intimate one.

Relational Loneliness is About the Self

Respondents in this section had ideas about relational loneliness that were primarily self-based rather than explicitly referring to the relationship in which the individual was addressing loneliness. The experience of loneliness in the relationship was attributed to the self in the recognition of loneliness as due to personal needs that are not met, when a person is not right with his or her individual self, and as part of the human condition.

Personal Needs

This theme relates to whether or not the individual's needs are met. This category involves definitions that suggest loneliness felt in the relationship is not derived from relational issues but issues concerning the needs of the individual. This is similar to the previous category of loneliness in general being related to needs, but this context is now more particular—the context of a particular relationship. As Maria suggested, "If you feel lonely all
the time, then you're not in a good relationship because it's not filling your needs. Your relationship is important, but it's not everything in your life."

Sheila indicated that her needs, both in general and in terms of her specific relationship, always have been met; therefore, she has not ever felt lonely. Lewis, Victor, and Lorraine all indicated that they do not feel lonely in their relationship because their needs are met. Lewis responded that he had never felt lonely in his relationship with Marguerite:

Not at all. I don't know if it's the coincidence of having met my wife at a time when I'd been working professionally and I had always thought about coming back to school and seeing what that was like, and maybe feeling the fulfillment of that—I don't know if it was all those things that had come together at the same time. Never. Not for a second. Not when she was on one side of the country and I was on the other. Just not at all. I'm a happy guy. There were some definitely rocky moments during medical school—that wasn't loneliness, that was insanity and stress and strain but not lonely at all.

Lorraine said that she and Joyce do not feel lonely in their relationship very much because they talk about what they need. In so doing, she implicitly related loneliness to needs that are not being met. Victor said that he believes that Thom feels lonely in the relationship more than he does because Victor's needs are more fully met than Thom's, primarily in terms of outside contact: "I work with people around me all the time, and Thom doesn't."

Nilash related that his needs for support were not always met. He explained his understanding that feeling lonely in a relationship can be destructive in that his experience made him doubt the strength of his relationship:

[Sharon:] Given your knowledge that you're in a good relationship, how do you make sense of that experience?
[Nilash:] It kind of can get defeating. There was a moment when I thought, this is not what I expected from the other person. I need more support. But, basically, I put myself in the other person's shoes, and then I totally understand what is going on. And so, that's how I deal with it. So, to some extent, I understand why I am feeling lonely, but I also understand why this other person is making me feel lonely, too. I feel that I wouldn't have done differently. So I deal with it. . . . Those moments of loneliness, you tend to place things into context and you tend to—maybe it's just me, maybe it's the kind of person I am—but you tend to, it can be very destructive, perhaps, because in my case, I suddenly considered, you know, we're going to have problems in the future. If this is what is going to happen all the time in the future, is this what I want?

Nilash felt his loneliness was due to personal needs he has in a relationship that were not being met by Shravini. Maria indicated that she feels lonely in her relationship because she is unsatisfied with other aspects of her life that don't have anything to do with her relationship—but she felt the effects on her relationship, anyway.

Many stories crossed categories. For instance, Betsy indicated that she felt loneliness in her relationship when Greg did not take care of her in the manner she preferred. She felt vulnerable in what she perceived as his lack of caring—caring that did not meet her needs:

There have been a number of times that I have felt really lonely in my marriage. One of those times happened fairly early on. I had an unfortunate accident playing volleyball, and I badly sprained my ankle. He brought me home from the emergency room after it had been treated and wrapped, and I was in quite a bit of pain and I couldn't walk around on my foot. And Greg left to go do errands. And so I was sitting in the house by myself, still in my athletic clothes, they were all sweaty, so I was damp and was chilled and my ankle hurt abominably and I couldn't fend for myself at all. And I just felt completely abandoned. And I thought, "What have I done? What have I gotten myself into? The person who I thought would be right here, solicitous, attending to my every need has just taken off somewhere, and I have no way of getting ahold of him." So that was probably one of the times when I felt the most acutely lonely.
Betsy's narrative detailed her loneliness in that moment as one when her needs were not met. She focused on Greg's actions—a relational component—as not meeting her needs, but the fact remains that she focused on her needs as not being met as the primary reason for the loneliness. She felt his emotional and physical absence in terms of her unmet needs. She felt alone, but she felt alone because of her need to be cared for, and Greg was not caring for her. Because her needs were not met, she felt as if Greg had abandoned her. This theme centered on unmet personal needs as integral to the feeling of loneliness in the relationship—whether or not those needs were relational in nature.

**Not in Touch With or at Odds With Myself**

A theme related to the aspect of individuality in relational loneliness is illustrated in Lorraine's knowledge of how she is lonely: "I'm lonely," she states, "when I'm not in touch with myself." With that reasoning, she went on to explain that she feels little loneliness inside her relationship because her partner, Joyce, gives her the space to be in touch with herself:

I think that the reason I feel so little loneliness in this relationship is because I know I'm accepted as I am, I don't have to pretend to be something else. And I have the space, emotional space, to be in touch with me. And I know it's safe to allow her in there. You know, so it's not like I'm hiding anything. These days, about the only time I'm feeling lonely is when I can't be me. I'm in a situation where I can't be fully me, there's something about me I have to hide, and I don't have to do that at home. I don't have to do that with Joyce. And I feel totally accepted and trusted, and so there's no need to be lonely, as long as that contact is there.

The reference to "something about me I have to hide" could be reflected partly in the fact that she is in a lesbian relationship. Lorraine indicated that although some people know that she is lesbian, neither she nor Joyce would
feel safe at all if they were to come out to others in the workplace. They both
described their workplace situation as being potentially physically threatening
if their sexual orientation were to be made public. With others, they pretend;
with each other, they can be themselves and, hence, do not feel lonely.

Doug talked about feeling at odds with himself about some feelings he
had that he could not figure out and about which he felt guilty:

Those were some difficult times to get through, not knowing how to
deal with Carrie's sense of loss, not knowing how to deal with my
sense of loss, not knowing how to deal with the feelings of guilt of I
have two living parents and now my wife's both are dead. Forgiving
yourself for thinking, God, why couldn't it have been one of mine? So,
that would be definitely one time during our good relationship where,
if you asked us right in the middle of it, we probably would have said
we were lonely.

Some of the feelings Doug related were of not knowing himself, of not
knowing how to take care of himself and his wife, and of not understanding
what he implied were his own treacherous feelings about his parents. His
loneliness partly came from his feeling of disconnection with himself.

Anandi spoke of feelings of loneliness in general as being due to
feeling lonely in her own body. Later in her interview, however, she also
noted that feeling lonely in her body affects her self-esteem—as well as her
feelings about her relationship with Rustam:

So, to a certain extent, at the beginning of my marriage, that added
pressure to me. Especially because Rustam has been with a lot of
attractive women, and he's an attractive guy, so it always made me feel
like I was second best because I felt like if I were prettier it would be a
different relationship with Rustam. And with all these problems, I was
already insecure about the relationship, and then this, too. And then
one day I came out and said, "Maybe our sex life would be better if I was
better looking." And maybe that was the wrong time to ask him,
because he was p.o.ed about something, and he said, "Maybe it would."
And at that point, I really felt lonely. There are some things in life that
you can't do anything about. Yeah, I can get skinner, but I can't
change the way I look. And to me, it was like being unfair. Because I said, "Why does that matter so much?" So, yeah, little things like that. But not like I felt, I just felt alienated at that point, but it was not a carryover effect. It didn’t come back to haunt me—yeah, sometimes it did, but it’s kind of hard to say. But I don’t think it’s been a regular phenomenon... But I still think it’s a personality issue.

Anandi’s reiteration of her loneliness within her body suggested a relational effect. Again, she related it to a personality issue—in so doing, she took responsibility for her own feelings of loneliness as being due to her own issues instead of being due to, for instance, a partner’s insensitivity. This overall theme of loneliness as being due to a person feeling at odds with himself or herself is individual in nature, relational in effect.

Part of the Human Condition

Some people suggested that loneliness is part of being an individual human being. Anandi suggested repeatedly that feeling loneliness is an individual thing; it is a personality issue. Gregory indicated his experience of relational loneliness as not distinct from general loneliness. "I'm 'me' long before I'm 'we'," he quipped and suggested that loneliness has to do with an individual and not a relationship. His particular experience of loneliness centers on feelings of disconnection to self and manifests itself, in his words, "when I’m not feeling me, when I’m not feeling Betsy, when I’m not feeling anything around, then is when I’m lonely."

In concert with Gregory, Bernice suggested that dealing with loneliness is something an individual must do alone. In direct contrast to some people’s understandings of loneliness as a void that only can be filled by another person, Bernice suggests that another person cannot fill that void for you. But this is very individualized. And even if you’re in a great relationship, it’s a very private sort of feeling. And the relationship is not a part of that
loneliness, or it's not because of that. It's something that you're working on. You know, you work on stuff yourself, too . . . I have felt like I internalized it as an individual, but it has nothing really to do with my relationship.

Because of their perception of loneliness as having to do with an individual, partners Diane and Bernice absolved each other of responsibility for their own feelings of loneliness. Diane said that there was nothing to be done about her loneliness, that Bernice could not get rid of it for her: "I think my loneliest times have been other circumstances that didn't have to do with her." Bernice, as well, indicated that she did not feel lonely when Diane was gone. She feels at peace. More in-depth discussion of the influence of perception on loneliness and communication is included in chapter three. This self-based theme involved descriptions of relational loneliness that suggest that people in relationships will feel lonely because human beings feel lonely, period.

In summary, all of these diverse themes about loneliness in the context of good intimacy combine to provide clues on how better to define relational loneliness. Relational loneliness can be seen as the kind of loneliness that occurs because of the presence of intimacy. Intimate relating is not, therefore, a confounding context; rather, relational loneliness only can exist in the presence of good intimacy. Some respondents suggested themes of loneliness in the relationship that rang true to general definitions of loneliness. Those instances I would refer to as loneliness in the relationship. Relational loneliness, however, seems to occur not in spite of good intimacy, but because of it.

To this point, I have presented inductively derived themes of participants' general understandings of loneliness and understandings of
loneliness when it occurs within relationships. In chapter three, I analyze links between loneliness and communication.
CHAPTER 3

LONELINESS AND COMMUNICATION

This chapter addresses the second research question: What is the relationship between feelings of loneliness and communication with one's intimate partner? In particular, links are considered between and among personal definitions of loneliness, experiences of loneliness, and communication.

Expressing Loneliness in the Relationship

The first and most obvious consideration of links between communication and loneliness is in the interviewees' discussions of whether or not they talk to their partners about loneliness when they feel lonely in their relationship. In the following pages, individual narratives are considered as examples of possible connections between couples' explicit talk and their general ideas of loneliness and its place within the relationship. I first consider those interviewees who said they do not typically talk with their partners about feelings of relational loneliness either because they cannot explain it or they consciously choose not to explain it. Second, I consider those interviewees who said they do talk with their partners about relational loneliness.
Loneliness Unexpressed

Many participants expressed mixed feelings when responding to one of the final interview questions, "Do you typically talk to your partner about any relational loneliness you've felt?" Although a vast majority of the participants indicated that they believed feeling some degree of loneliness was probably normal within any relationship, some still indicated reluctance in talking with their partners about it. Anandi, a 29-year-old East Indian woman who indicated that she had, indeed, felt lonely within her good relationship on occasion, displayed this reluctance:

[Sharon:] When it does happen, typically do you talk to Rustam about it?

[Anandi:] That depends on the situation. Not always. Because sometimes the feeling passes and it's not worth bringing up something because then he'll probe and sometimes it's almost a self-protective stance. You don't want to be asked too much about it because it brings up other issues you've been trying to hide. Or you've been trying to get away from. So sometimes I talk, sometimes I don't, sometimes I wait for some time until the feeling passes, sometimes I just talk to my friends. Sometimes it depends on who is around. . . . I prefer to do it alone. Then decide how I'm going to tackle the situation, how I'm going to talk to the person so the person doesn't dig deeper. Just cut it off at that level without saying any more.

Anandi's feelings were that talking to Rustam might be risky, and so she at times chose to "protect" herself by not even raising the issue, or, like Rhonda said, by calling on "somebody that I wouldn't normally talk to and talk to them about it." Anandi also suggested that Rustam would not understand and may take her feelings out of context and make the loneliness out to be more meaningful than she wants him to:

I prefer to deal with loneliness privately rather than bring it out because sometimes when you talk to people about it, they tend to take
it up into where you didn't want it to go. It becomes a mountain when it should have been a molehill. I prefer to do it alone.

This response was typical of those who indicated that they did not reveal their loneliness on the assumption that their partner necessarily would feel hurt or would make the loneliness out to be a sign of relational decay. These participants, then, noted that they themselves might not believe that their felt loneliness was indicative of a relational lack, but they could not depend upon their partners to share that belief.

Life partners Joyce and Lorraine spoke several times throughout their separate interviews about the fact that each did not believe that there was anything inside a relationship that was "inappropriate" to feel; yet, as in Anandi's narrative, they did not always share their lonely feelings. Lorraine indicated that she had lived too long to believe in fairy tales about romance and intimacy and that she and Joyce accept each other fully:

I went through so many so-called unacceptable feelings in my [previous] marriage and in my being a mother. I came to terms with those, came to accept myself just as I was. I gave up custody of my youngest child. That was a big "no-no." You know, unless you're an unfit mother, you don't give up custody of your child. I had, my older daughter, I had to kick out of the house. I put up with an abusive husband for fifteen years. Lots of things that were no-nos that I have forgiven myself for and that I've accepted as you did what you had to do at the time. And so I don't get all caught up with what's "unacceptable" anymore... [In my current relationship with Joyce], I know I'm accepted as I am, I don't have to pretend to be something else. And I have the space, emotional space, to be in touch with me. And I know it's safe to allow her in there. You know, so it's, it's not like I'm hiding anything.

Lorraine indicated that she was not communicatively constrained by any stigmas; in a separate interview, her partner, Joyce, confirmed her own similar feelings, indicating that she and Lorraine talked everything out and
did not believe that feelings of any kind were "wrong" in and of themselves. Later in her interview, however, Joyce also said that the time in the relationship when she felt most lonely—which happened to be a time in which she also felt angry—she did not communicate those feelings to Lorraine:

[Sharon:] Did you discuss that with Lorraine?

[Joyce:] I talked about one small part. But the rest of it I didn't. [Was there any reason for that?] Yeah. Not wanting to let her know that I was ever really mad at her. Of course, she would tell you, of course we'll be mad at each other. Yes, dear, but that's not really mad at you. Those don't count, those are normal "You piss me off when you do this or that." Okay. Those don't count to me, those aren't really mad.

Joyce, like Lorraine, spent a great deal of her interview talking about her relationship as one in which they worked things out, talked things through, constantly negotiated feelings. Yet, in the one instance when she could remember feeling terribly lonely and terribly angry with Lorraine, she did not communicate that loneliness and anger to her.

Several portions of Doug's interview illustrate that he did not tell Carrie that he felt loneliness in their relationship because he did not know how to communicate his feelings:

[Sharon:] Did you talk about that with each other?

[Doug:] No. Didn't know how. Didn't have a clue how. That's part of why it was a bad time for us.

[Sharon:] Did it feel like, the experiences you were going through you were supposed to go through? Did it feel inappropriate to you? Did you name it, "I should feel this" or "I shouldn't feel this"?

[Doug:] I tried to deny every single emotion possible. Absolutely wipe it out in whatever way possible, which for me was physical tension. I got real good at it, I've been doing it all my life. . . . So, the answer is
definitely not. I just tried to deny them. Life was a lot simpler when I could deny all my emotions. . . . A lot of times it would be a lot easier not to have emotions.

Doug did not know how to communicate his loneliness, an inability that he perceived as bad for the relationship. He saw his inability to communicate as connected to his attempt to deny how he was feeling. Perhaps some of Doug's difficulty is wrapped up in sex-role socialization and the fact that men are not typically encouraged to be expressive.

Perhaps Doug's inability to speak was part of socialization and/or part of his denial process, but perhaps it was also part of the loneliness itself. Not knowing how to speak of the feeling of loneliness seems to be one characteristic of the experience of loneliness. Larry also indicated that he did not know how to communicate his loneliness because he did not have words to explain the experience:

[Larry:] I had a real itch or a real hunger for intimacy which my wife always confused with wanting more sex. And I could never convince her that that wasn't exactly what I wanted. But that seemed to be the only way, sex seemed to be the only way I could get anywhere near the intimacy that I craved.

[Sharon:] So it was pretty much undefined, but you felt it a lot.

[Larry:] Yes. It wasn't completely undefined in that I knew that I was frustrated, and I was lonely and that I was longing and yearning for intimacy. But it was just like I couldn't communicate that to her because every time I tried, she says, "Oh, not enough sex." I'd say, "That's not it. That's not it." But I guess in a way it was because that was the only way I could get any of the kind of intimacy I needed. So. It was very frustrating, as you said a while ago.

Larry could not cure his loneliness either by having sex or by trying to explain it because he did not have the language to describe his experience. Perhaps
people cannot communicate loneliness well because we currently lack a common word or phrase that comes close to describing the experience.

Marguerite indicated that she tries very hard to discuss her difficult feelings with her husband, Lewis. Her response details the difficulty she has in raising these issues:

[Sharon:] Do you discuss that typically with Lewis?

[Marguerite:] Probably typically not. However, in the last year or so, I have had to make myself do it. Sometimes, I felt like I was going to go crazy. If he doesn't know what you're thinking, then you're only beating yourself up. Again, that's just me trying to be more assertive and all that. I made myself explain to him how I feel. So, yeah, it's very hard. He doesn't understand sometimes. Maybe by the time we're married forty years, he'll understand... Me expressing my feelings, I learned pretty quick, I just gotta keep doing it. It makes me feel better. I go out—and I don't think he knows this—and seek books that tell me how to express myself more. [You're working.] I am. I have to. I really do, I feel it's important.

Marguerite experienced first hand the difficulty of trying to talk about her feelings, and she forced herself to do so because she felt the effort was important both for her and for her marriage. She implicitly attributed some of the reason for her feelings of loneliness to her lack of assertiveness in telling what she feels, and she said she gets some satisfaction in "correcting" her communication "lack." Her loneliness is partly due to her perception that she does not speak up.

Loneliness Concealed

While narratives from Doug, Larry, and even Marguerite show how some people cannot articulate their experience, Laurie's narrative shows how some people consciously choose not to attempt to communicate their loneliness. Laurie at first said that sometimes she does not tell her husband when she is lonely because he will not respond in the way that she needs him
to (a belief which, in turn, probably feeds into her loneliness). She seems to feel like she could communicate her loneliness, but she chooses not to because her disclosure likely will not be met in a way that will be helpful to either partner:

So sometimes I don't talk to him about it because I'm afraid he's going to get upset and try to solve it for me and it doesn't need to be solved the way he would solve it. So I really don't want someone to solve my problems; I can solve them. I just need someone to listen. I think he knows sometimes he doesn't, I told you, he gets mad at me if I don't tell him things that are bothering me. But I don't know sometimes how he's going to react, so I don't want to have that kind of argument with him or whatever. I just kind of keep things inside. And then I start crying and have an emotional attack. (She laughs.) He's like, "Why don't you tell me about these things?" He also talks so much, he says, "Sometimes I don't give you a chance to talk and tell me what's going on." But that's just how he is. And I've always been a listener in relationships, I don't always tell people things, I always seem to be the person people come to and talk about things going on with them, but I'm not always the person to share when it's really too much.

She sees the possibility of discussing loneliness as linked to the personality traits of her husband and herself—that's just how he is, she said of her husband, whom she implies does not listen as well as she would like and whose instrumental orientation could again be linked to sex-role socialization. Whatever the reason, she sees her husband as not likely to be able to hear her experience fully.

Laurie's language implies a protective stance of her husband. He will not understand, she suggested, and perhaps would get "upset" and "react" because "he gets too emotionally involved in it." But Laurie's conscious choice not to talk to her husband in one sense also functions as self-protection. Realizing that her attempts to share her feelings will be met with an instrumental approach that does not meet her needs, she consciously
chooses to avoid that situation. Consequently, some of her loneliness probably is cyclical because if she chooses not to talk to him, she feels lonely not only in the knowledge that she "cannot" talk to him but also in recognizing her own decision not to open up.

Later in her interview, however, Laurie indicated another reason why perhaps she does not tell her husband about the occasional times when she feels loneliness. Talking about it would not change anything. It would not bridge their separate existences; as related in chapter two, they never can be the other. Portions of Laurie's narrative are illustrative:

He just can't have had the experiences that I've had. I can't be him— you know what I'm saying? But I feel like I know him probably better than he knows me. . . . I think that's the part where in a relationship you could feel lonely. [Crying.] If they can't—what's the word?—touch you inside. When Leia told me about this [research study], I just felt like, I understand how you would feel lonely in a relationship. I just knew it was that empty feeling again. No one else can, they can't be you, and they can't experience what you go through. And I think that's where it's the lonely part. . . . No one can touch. Because you can't explain it to somebody. I told him, I can't explain how I'm feeling.

Laurie does not communicate her feeling of loneliness to her partner, and she badly wants to connect, but she describes the poignancy of relational loneliness less as a communication problem than as an issue intrinsic to human existence. He cannot be me, she says, sorrowfully, and I cannot be him, and simply explaining any feelings is not a magic potion that will allow us to be in the other's self. Her tears suggested that she did not need just to tell her husband; Laurie's grief lies in the fact that telling, to her, will not solve the perceived problem of their inherent separation. It would not bring him into the center of her being.
Another participant, Nilash, indicated that he has not explained his current feelings of loneliness in his relationship for protective reasons similar to those cited by Laurie. In not talking to Shravini, he was protecting her but also protecting himself from her failure to respond to his needs. Laurie's husband failed to listen; Nilash's partner failed to support. This portion of Nilash's narrative is re-presented in this chapter to explore further his links between loneliness and communication:

[Nilash:] It came to a point where I couldn't express my frustration about the job because I realized that even though Shravini was listening, it was only adding to her frustration. She was getting scared. It was adding to her fears about the future. And then she wasn't supportive. And it was not that she didn't want to, but she didn't realize she wasn't being supportive--she would express her fears back to me, and the way it came across to me was, it only added to my frustrations. "Did you hear from someone? Oh, my God, I hope you get a job. Do you think you'll get a job? How does it look? Have you applied to any other places?" And so she was trying to be supportive in that way, but in a way, she was expressing her fear. And then it came to a point where I wouldn't tell you what I'm feeling about my job situation. To some extent, you are not being being true because I'm likely to say, "I'll work something out. Something's likely to happen." But it's never the pessimism that is underlying that expression. I wouldn't express it. And there is a degree of loneliness in that experience. There are times that I felt, I wish I could just put it to you the way it is. And that you wouldn't suffer from that as you are.

Nilash's narrative differs from Laurie's in content; he declined to speak about his job search, while Laurie declined to speak about her loneliness. But, significantly, Nilash's decision not to tell was part of his relational loneliness. While Laurie and others chose not to speak of their loneliness, Nilash chose not to speak of something important in his life, which became the content of his loneliness. Hence, for some people, not telling of an important part of one's life can be the source of the relational loneliness.
Other interviewees noted that when they are lonely in their relationship, they try not to think about it. They do whatever they can, as Doug said earlier, to deny their hurtful feelings of loneliness or, as Janice put it, that when loneliness occurs, the thing to do is "quickly get the situation resolved so you don't have that feeling." Laurie's and Kathryn's narratives contain that idea in explanations that their lives are kept full in part to provide a reason not to think about loneliness:

[Laurie:] I think what I try to do is I try to make myself so busy that I don't think about it. Do you know what I'm saying? You've got so many things going on. I just try to add so many things so I don't think about it, you know? Keep yourself so busy that you don't have time to think about being lonely or being sad or think about the changes, you just kind of survive.

[Kathryn:] Usually there's enough going on with Mike in my life to keep my focus off of that, too.

Perhaps these women do not want to address what they experience as painful feelings because the pain of loneliness does not have a place in their schemata for good relationships.

From the whole of Laurie's narrative, I surmise that Laurie sees the difficulty of relational loneliness as an inherent, universal separation that no two people ever can bridge. Kathryn's narrative suggests that she attributes some of her feelings of loneliness to the fact that her relationship is not a marriage, and she does not know whether she and her partner will be together to the end:

At those times I feel kind of melancholy and oh—not as deep as remorse—I guess melancholy is a good way to look at it. Kind of like regret, but not really. [Like bittersweet?] Maybe. That we're not going to get married, we're not going to do these traditional things, I can't really say, like maybe somebody else would, that forty years from now we're going to definitely still be together, whereas somebody in a
marriage will think, "Oh, well, of course we'll be together unless we get a divorce." Well, since we don't have that legal boundary, I guess, we're more pragmatic in saying, "Well, who knows if we're going to really be together? We don't plan to be separate. But I can't really say." Or maybe someone else might say—there's that external validation thing again—someone else would say, "Oh, well you're going to grow up to be an old maid." That kind of philosophical loneliness. Occasionally I feel that way about it. I'm not in a relationship like everybody else. We do handle it differently, we've accepted that, but it's not like everybody else. It's different. Nothing in life is sure. I guess it kind of brings attention to that.

Her narrative is not that much different from those of Laurie and others; it is different in the sense that she saw some of her grief as being rooted in the form of her relationship. The right form, perhaps, would make the feeling go away. Even though she said that "nothing in life is sure," she still implied that other people who have made a firm commitment have more certainty than she does in her more "pragmatic" arrangement. Other people—who are relating within Kathryn's "right" form of legally sanctioned marriage or cohabitation—still indicate the same feelings, but they attribute the loneliness to something else (e.g., human beings' essential aloneness, inability to communicate, or gender differences).

Loneliness Expressed

Very few participants indicated that they share their lonely feelings with their partners. Bernice indicated that she sometimes shares her feelings of loneliness with her relational partner but not always. Her reasoning, however, was that loneliness is an individual feeling, not having anything to do with the relationship. Because she defined loneliness as part of the human condition, she did not address it as a relational concern:

[Sharon:] You said you don't share that with yourself and with your partner?
Bernice indicated that any loneliness she felt was due to the fact that human beings are going to feel lonely. She did not attribute it to her relationship and did not define the loneliness as existing inside her intimate relationship. Basically, because she defined it individually, it did not affect her potential understanding of her relationship with Diane.

Beth related that she does talk with her husband about loneliness—but she defined loneliness differently throughout her narrative, and her and her husband's expressions of loneliness were met differently depending on Beth's definition. In the first part of the following segment, she implicitly defined loneliness as the desire for time alone or as similar to autonomy in the relational dialectic of autonomy and connection (Baxter, 1990). In this case, she was not threatened or hurt by the expression of loneliness:

[Sharon:] Do you ever talk with him about those days of loneliness?

[Beth:] Yeah, we've talked about that, we haven't used those terms, but we've talked about how some days I just don't want to do anything with you. I don't think I've ever been as crude as to say, "I just don't want to look at your face," but "I kind of wanted to hang out by myself today." We want our space, and we want our little bit of disconnectedness, but yet we still maintain relationship. We're still saving face. I'm not saying, "Gosh, I hate you today." I'll say, "I'm just reading in the bedroom. I just want to do this today; you can do whatever you want to do." But both he and I have acknowledged that there are moments where, while we still love the person, we don't want to be with that person or we don't want to talk to that person. I don't know why people expect different things from their romantic relationships because if you think about even your best friends, sometimes your best friend—there are some moments where you feel
like, I don't feel like hanging out with you for a while. Or even your parents. I love my mom and dad, but I just don't want to talk to my mom right now. But when it comes to intimate, romantic relationships, all of a sudden that stuff is supposed to change and you're supposed to want to be with that person all the time? So I don't find that problematic that I feel that way, I'm not bothered.

Beth was not bothered by loneliness when she defined it as needing autonomy. As she continued her narrative, however, she put a different spin on loneliness, discussing what happens when the imbalance in the dialectic is not met by both partners evenly—that is, when Tim wanted alone time, Beth wanted connection, and their negotiation of that imbalance went awry:

Although, to be honest, when Tim has said that stuff to me before—I remember one of the first times he told me, and I was hurt by this—when I was going to school in Michigan and I was home for a break and we spent a lot of time together over that break. Concentrated time together. And then I got home that night after driving eight hours to Michigan, I was crying because I missed him, and he said something to me like, "Well, I kind of enjoyed my day alone today." And I think one, it was bad timing on his part, because I had just left and was so upset from leaving him, and when he said that, I was really hurt by that. But now I know that it was just because we had spent so much time together and it was, that was his space and made him feel independent and he did his own thing. But I remember that moment and I remember feeling kind of bad about that. But then I got over that quickly because I said, well, sometimes I feel that way, too.

In Beth's narrative, she understood loneliness in the relationship when she defined it as her own need for autonomy; she was hurt, however, by her husband's similar expression. So the expression of loneliness for Beth resulted in mixed feelings for her, as if she could trust her own experience as normal for a relationship, but, for a short while anyway, she could not similarly trust her husband's experience.
Conclusions

My overall understanding of these people's inclinations to share their experience of loneliness with their partner lies in the following insight derived from these in-depth conversations: They talk about loneliness when they feel that its presence is not connected to the value of the relationship; they do not talk about loneliness with their partners when they feel that its presence is connected to the value of the relationship. As explained in this chapter, far more people in this sample acted upon the former than the latter.

Refraining from expressing loneliness in a relationship seems to be rooted in a desire to protect ourselves from realizing the limits of any relationship—or, perhaps more accurately, from realizing the limits of relating. Perhaps some people cannot speak of loneliness because then, in speaking, they will see more clearly the inherent distance between people, even in good relationships. If a person were to choose to express loneliness inside a relationship, the experience would become more real, highlighting the liminal space between the partners and perhaps even risking the relationship. Withholding talk because of inability or because of choice perhaps can help us keep beliefs we might want to keep about our possibilities to connect with others. Not sharing relational loneliness, then, perhaps is a way to protect the relationship. Not speaking of it protects the relationship but sorrowfully, grievingly; some people have described their loneliness as being kept inside, in mourning.

Expressing loneliness has implications for relationships if the loneliness is perceived to be tied to the value of the relationship. The few people who indicated that they do express their relational loneliness seemed to start from different assumptions about loneliness and relationships in the
first place. Their expressions of loneliness were not always assumed to be an expression of relational lack because the loneliness was perceived to be either a healthy growth experience or a normal part of the business of relating.
CHAPTER 4

A THEORY OF RELATIONAL LONELINESS

To this point, I have introduced the study, provided a literature review, explained the method, presented themes inductively derived from interviews, and explored links between loneliness and communication. In the first part of this chapter, these steps are briefly summarized. The remainder of the chapter is a discussion of the theory of relational loneliness derived from my data as well as suggestions for future research.

Summary

General definitions of intimacy imply that to feel lonely within an intimate relationship is inappropriate. In this dissertation, I have suggested that to feel loneliness within intimate relationships is possible and does not necessarily reflect a lack in the relationship or in any individual’s social or communication skills. This study examined loneliness within good intimate relationships. Two research questions guided this project. First, what meanings do individuals attribute to a feeling of loneliness if they feel it within the context of what they perceive to be an intimate relationship that is healthy and strong? Second, what is the relationship between feelings of loneliness and communication with one’s intimate partner?
The sample consisted of 29 individuals in 19 different relationships who perceive themselves to be in good, committed, romantic relationships. Each interview was composed of open-ended questions on participants' ideas about their intimate relationships, loneliness in general, and loneliness within their intimate relationships.

The method involved analytic induction of the interviews to develop themes for the experience of loneliness in general and for the experience of loneliness in relationships. First, I asked participants to tell me their ideas about loneliness in general. "When you use the word lonely in general, what does it mean for you?" After transcribing the interviews, I developed themes from each interview, compared them against other interviews and condensed similar themes. The themes, described in chapter two, are summarized in outline form below:

I. General loneliness is centered in relationships
   A. A void that can only be filled by another person
      1. Feeling a partner's physical absence
      2. Like not being in a relationship at all
      3. Lack of human stimulus
   B. Feeling disconnected/isolated
      1. When not in harmony with others
      2. Occurs when care-taking function goes awry
      3. Isolated in the midst of others
   C. Inability to communicate
      1. Absence of others
      2. Failure of language

II. General loneliness is centered in the individual
   A. Personal choice
   B. Exists in self-image
   C. No meaning/loss of will to live

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III. General loneliness is centered in the situation
   A. Particular associations
   B. About the unknown
   C. Associated with death

Next, I analyzed responses to the question "Have you ever felt something like what you described as loneliness inside your good relationship?" Again, I formulated themes from each interview, compared them, and condensed them. The themes of loneliness in relationships, also described in chapter two, are:

I. Relational loneliness is about relationships
   A. When arguing/at odds with partner
   B. Associated with change
      1. Uncertainty
   C. Physical aloneness
   D. Emotional aloneness
      1. Can't be the other person
      2. We cannot talk
   E. Other relationships as points of reference
      1. Others are truly lonely, I'm not in comparison

II. Relational loneliness is about the self
   A. Personal needs
   B. Not in touch with or at odds with myself
   C. Part of the human condition

The concept of relational loneliness was posited as a type of loneliness that occurs not in spite of the presence of a good intimate relationship but because of that presence.

After I developed themes about loneliness in general and loneliness in relationships, I explored links between loneliness and communication. Loneliness felt in the relationship most often went unexpressed when the loneliness was described as being tied to the value of the relationship. When loneliness was perceived to occur only during the bad times in a relationship,
the partner was less likely to share that feeling than when loneliness was not seemingly perceived to be relevant to the relationship.

A Theory of Relational Loneliness

Based on analysis of the themes developed from the interviews, I have constructed a theory of relational loneliness in an effort to provide explanations for and coherency to the experience. In summary, the theory suggests that people have expectations about relationships, constructed in large part by social and cultural influences, which inevitably are violated. When people recognize the inconsistencies between their lived relationship and the cultural ideal, they feel what they call *loneliness*, which is experienced differently from general loneliness. One of three options are chosen as a response to this loneliness—an attempted denial of the feeling of loneliness, a continuing struggle to make sense of the experience, and an acceptance of the experience as a growth experience. A partner's decisions on how and whether to communicate their experience to their partners in large part is affected by which of the three options they enact. I now will explain the theory's components in more detail.

Expectations of Relationships

The precipitating step in the experience of loneliness appears to involve cultural expectations of what a relationship should be like. Cultural scripts establish partners' expectations and ideals for relationships that affect perceptions and behaviors in actual relationships. Crosby (1985), who published a compilation of extensive readings on Western expectations—or, as he called them, *myths*—about intimacy, argued that "all societies have both a normative ideology or belief system and a behavioral history. Rarely do these two reach strong degrees of concurrence" (p. xii). These normative
expectations of intimacy cannot always be met and usually are not fully met in romantic relationships. Behavior "not in congruence with the ideological norm is labeled deviant regardless of the degree or frequency of occurrence" (Crosby, p. xii).

The Western ideal of intimate relationships as stable, connected, loving, supportive, interdependent unions based on love is strongly held in our collective psyche. For example, the romantic notion that, in commitment, "the two shall become one" greatly affects expectations of the nature of intimate relationships. People cannot always be united as one; people do not always, in their relationships, sense a total connection to the other. In my study, the interviewees seemed to label the experience of violation of expectations loneliness. The label of loneliness then, may be an attempt to name an underlying sensation of the limitation of human relationships and relating.

Many of the themes of loneliness and relational loneliness illustrated in chapter two can be read as unmet expectations of intimacy. Consistent with Kiefer's (1980) observation that "one solution to the problem of defining loneliness is to identify those situations that evoke it" (p. 426), all of the themes posited in this study are of circumstances surrounding loneliness that suggest a relational expectation has not been met. I'm lonely, said these participants, when I'm out of control. I'm lonely when I'm arguing. I'm lonely when I cannot talk to my partner. These participants spoke about times when they felt strange in their relationship, times and situations they defined as loneliness. For example, many participants noted that they feel lonely in their relationships when they are arguing or are at odds with each other. Perhaps they are lonely largely because they believe they are not
supposed to fight. They are not lonely because they are physically alone—they are lonely when they think, in their intimate relationships, that they are not supposed to be physically alone. The expectation that is violated, when experienced on some conscious level, has to be named. Some people name it **loneliness**.

Although this study did not provide data to connect definitively various social positions with specific responses, I did note trends or differences between various groups that warrant consideration. The gay and lesbian participants and the straight participants did not seem to define loneliness in disparate ways, but they did emphasize different parts of the interview. The gay and lesbian participants devoted more time to their explanations of how they felt supported or not in their relationships by family and friends. Several of the participants who were in heterosexual relationships responded with puzzlement over a question on whether and how they felt supported in their relationship, as if outside support for their intimate relationships was not an issue important to consider. None of the gay or lesbian participants passed over that question as unimportant probably because homosexual relationships are not the norm; therefore, they are much more likely to meet resistance or even hostility from circles of family and friends. Cultural norms about what constitutes a good relationship affected how these participants addressed the interview questions.

Another way that social positions influenced the interviews and/or participants' expectations of intimacy was found in whether or not the subject matter itself was considered important enough to discuss in the first place. Anandi mentioned that the study of loneliness, in her native India, would be considered a frivolous, even ridiculous, way to spend one's time:
In India, something like this would be scoffed at. What is there to analyze in a relationship? It's taken for granted. So they wouldn't even come out and research it. They're probably like, "What? You're actually talking to someone about that?" (Both laugh.) . . . . When I first came here, it was amazing to me, I would watch TV shows and they're not exactly representative of what happens, but like, mother and daughter sitting together and saying, "Mom, we've got to talk." I would say, "What?! This is weird!" And people who were here before me would say, "No, no, you don't understand, that's how they do things here." I would say, "Why? What is there to analyze about a mother-daughter relationship? You love your mother, your mother loves you. What's all this?" And now I understand it better. I would just scoff and say, "Ahh, BS." I'll go back home and tell all my friends, you know, "They're so weird, they talk about their relationships." "Really?!"

Anandi's point is all too clear—the decision I made to study something like loneliness within intimacy is itself culturally influenced. People I interview from various cultures may not share my assumption that relationships themselves are worthy of study. Culture and social positions influenced people's expectations of intimacy and, therefore, influenced their responses to this work.

Responses to Relational Loneliness

Those participants in this research who have experienced loneliness in their relationships suggested that they engage with the feeling of loneliness and respond to it in several ways: Some attempt to deny the feeling, some struggle to make sense of it within the context of their relationship, and some accept it as a time of growth. In turn, their responses to their experience of loneliness within intimacy influenced their communication with their partners.
Denial

Some people may meet the experience of loneliness in relationships with denial. I am not suggesting, in formulating this option, that anyone who denies feeling lonely in their relationship is "in denial." Some people may not ever feel lonely in their relationship. This category addresses those who do sense something like loneliness but who do not name it out of fear of its consequences. A portion of Doug's interview, earlier used to support the theme of inability to communicate, is a good example of how some people may engage with the feeling of loneliness in the relationship:

[Sharon:] Did you talk about that with each other?

[Doug:] No. Didn't know how. Didn't have a clue how. That's part of why it was a bad time for us.

[Sharon:] Did it feel like, the experiences you were going through you were supposed to go through? Did it feel inappropriate to you? Did you name it, "I should feel this" or "I shouldn't feel this"?

[Doug:] I tried to deny every single emotion possible. Absolutely wipe it out in whatever way possible, which for me was physical tension. I got real good at it, I've been doing it all my life... So, the answer is definitely not. I just tried to deny them. Life was a lot simpler when I could deny all my emotions... A lot of times it would be a lot easier not to have emotions.

Doug was reflecting on past attributions and behaviors and has since moved on to different understandings of the possibilities of loneliness. But he was able to tell in hindsight what some people may never recognize in the present--during times of relational difficulty, he was denying his loneliness and its attendant emotions.

Those participants who articulated past attempts to deny the experience of loneliness in their relationship tended to make implicit attributions that
the relationship was to blame for the loneliness. Perhaps many of these participants did not express their loneliness to their partners because they did not want to recognize the limitations of their relationship; the notion that loneliness exists in a relationship implies, for these people, that the relationship will falter or will be harmed because of its presence. The implicit assumption is either that relationships that are not good invite loneliness or, conversely, that the presence of loneliness hurts relationships. Either way, many people may have the weight of their good relationship motivating their denial; if they acknowledged the loneliness, they would have to acknowledge a faulty relationship. If loneliness is not spoken, then, it is less sad or dangerous or treacherous.

Struggle

Some people meet the experience of loneliness in relationships with confusion. Perhaps, on some level, not quite as convinced of the truth of the normative model of intimate relationships, these people are working through the intrinsic contradictions of lived reality and cultural ideal. While those who deny relational loneliness may implicitly blame the relationship for the loneliness, those who struggle with the contradictions have not figured out what to name the experience and have not constructed attributions for its originating source.

Participants in this study whose talk evidenced a struggle to make sense of loneliness in their relationship also displayed tensions in the attempt to understand or even perceive the experience of loneliness. Some of that struggle, for example, may manifest in expressed dissonance. I picked up on what I perceived to be dissonance in several of my interviewees—who
perhaps wanted to help me but found themselves in a catch-22 situation. For example, consider the following dialogue:

[Sharon:] Most of those changes have been outside the context of the relationship?

[Laurie:] Right. Exactly. And so it's not, I don't think I've ever—I've felt lonely not within the relationship, though, where—well. Maybe I, but not from the relationship, I don't think. I don't think I've felt lonely, but you know, just being married, I've felt lonely within those periods of time. And maybe, in the sense that it's my problem, it's not anything to do with the relationship. Does that make sense?

The process of talking through the various layers of relational loneliness were difficult, at best, and many people, like Laurie, spoke in circles as they attempted to articulate their experience and negotiate the felt boundaries of the cultural model and the confusing sense that lived experience is somehow different.

Another indication of dissonance can be found in some people's attempts to question their own answers. Several participants questioned their own reflexivity, saying, in effect, that maybe they have experienced more loneliness in their relationship than they think they have. When this kind of response surfaced, I would repeat to the interviewees that I did not mean to suggest that everyone has to feel lonely inside their relationship. Still, given the sensitive nature of the study, whether or not respondents said they felt lonely, I saw many struggle with their own answers, searching for the thread that would make their experience and their definitions make sense.

After brainstorming a bit, Bob hit upon a basic contradiction of what it means for him to feel lonely. The kinds of contradictions I am about to illustrate served to confuse the interviews, as participants continually
searched for ways to make their narratives coherent. Loneliness is not about being alone, he had emphasized earlier. And it is about being alone:

[Bob:] I really was lonely because I really was alone. And. [Catching himself, laughing.] But I just said that wasn't my definition of lonely. [That's okay.] But do you know what I mean? [Yeah.] I was alone too much. That was a really awful time. That was really, literally being alone so much. I had too much alone time. I think it's real important to have alone time for every couple. I think people need to have alone time. And I need a lot of it, actually. And I get a lot of it, I get as much as I need. But then I had too much. I had too much time alone.

[Doug:] I think that probably relational loneliness occurs most often when I'm by myself—but there's a contradiction there, because I love being by myself, to putz around my basement when no human beings are around, I'm in my element sometimes.

Bob struggled in our interview to make his ideas and words fit his experiences, and Doug recognized the dual nature of his experience of aloneness. To illustrate another kind of contradiction, Anandi first described her relationship as one wherein she and Rustam talk about everything. Loneliness was rare in her relationship because they can talk about it:

Within the relationship there are very rare times. If there's anything, I usually talk to him about it. Or I wait and I don't talk for a long time and then finally I'll come in and burst out with how I feel, and he'll say, "You idiot! Why didn't you tell me about it?!" So no. Within the relationship it's kind of rare. Because we've learned to talk about it.

However, later in the interview, she indicated that when she does feel lonely in her relationship, she is likely to keep that information private. She, like Bob, seemingly contradicted herself. Her circular talk perhaps is an indication of an attempt to make the relationship, the experience of loneliness, and cultural ideals of intimacy all make sense.

In my view, the existence of these tensions or contradictions makes sense. These participants are evidencing an awareness both of larger cultural
scripts and assumptions about intimacy (i.e., we talk about our feelings because we love each other and we are in a good relationship) and loneliness (i.e., loneliness is what you get when you’re not in a relationship) as well as awareness of their own experiences (which do not always follow formal expectations and codes). These variations, then, in a sense are not contradictory but rather illustrate a commitment to understand and work through relational expectations.

Of the participants whose response to loneliness was struggle, many seemed to consider the struggle worthwhile. For example, several people, after I interviewed them, suggested that their partners might be interested in participating. None was more adamant than Laurie, who ignored my objections and literally arranged for her husband, Zach, to participate. Laurie called her husband at work, put him on the speaker phone to introduce us, and negotiated a time for us to meet. In response, Zach said, "Why don't I check times and get back with you?" Laurie replied, "How about Friday?" He consented, and we scheduled him for the following Friday. Laurie's persistence was one indicator to me of the strength and importance of the experience of struggling with loneliness for her. She wanted Zach to struggle with it, too.

For the people in this group—those struggling with how to respond to loneliness—there was no clear attribution for the experience. They did not all place responsibility on any one factor—the relationship, their partners, themselves, or external factors, for example. I suspect this was because their insights into the experiences are still undeveloped and emerging.
Acceptance

Other people appear to experience loneliness in relationships as a normal part of relating or as an opportunity for growth. In these cases, attributions regarding loneliness are dramatically different because nothing traumatic needs to be explained. The loneliness is there because people will feel lonely sometimes, and nobody and no one thing is to blame for its existence.

Bernice, for example, was one person who believes that the experience of loneliness can be indicative of growth. She emphasized the importance of loneliness as being only a fleeting moment, one that does not characterize the whole relationship:

I would think that if you’re lonely a lot of the time, then that has something to say about your relationship. But if it’s just moments of growth and understanding and awareness, that’s something that you need to sometimes figure out yourself as an individual. There’s growth as an individual, there’s growth in the relationship. So I don’t think it’s unhealthy to experience those things. But if it does become more than just those feelings of being alone, geez, that’s part of life. I think that’s probably. . . . But god, I mean, there’s trillions of people out there! If you don’t feel alone sometimes, or if you don’t feel like a peon in the sky, I mean, you gotta figure out what this is all about, anyway. How significant am I? You might feel a little lonely.

Bernice suggested, then, that loneliness is an indication of growth or reflexivity.

Others, as well, were adamant about the growth-facilitating dimension of loneliness: Doug said that "certainly there are lots of times when loneliness can be positive—if it's your self-reflective time in your life." Victor and Diane both suggested that only by feeling lonely do they know the feeling of not being lonely:
[Victor:] I think it's good to feel like that every once in a while because it does give you a sense of appreciation when you're not feeling it. You need to be, my thought is, how do you know when it's really good if you don't have really bad?

[Diane:] I think you need to feel loneliness in order to not feel lonely, in order to feel happy and intimate.

Feeling loneliness provides a contrast so that individuals can know that they are in a good relationship. Finally, Betsy suggested that loneliness is simply part of relating:

Certainly in, I have felt in our relationship profoundly lonely. And I almost have come to think that it isn't possible to really have a deeply intimate relationship with someone without risking those times when you have reached out and been very vulnerable and not found something there.

A person cannot have an intimate relationship without risking loneliness, suggested Betsy, because the risk is part of what makes the intimacy in the first place. These participants indicated views of loneliness as potentially positive, as opportunities or indicators of growth, and as part of the business of relating.

With this response of acceptance, feeling lonely is not, in fact, necessarily about a particular relationship. The experience could stem from the relationship, but it does not have to stem from the relationship. Rather, relational loneliness can be seen as a way of feeling deeply in human connection and perhaps exists because people connect well. People who feel relational loneliness are in touch with their relationship to the extent that they know what the relationship can and cannot do. The difference in valuing relational loneliness lies in what people do with that knowledge. Laurie knew it sorrowfully. Doug knew it painfully. Bernice knew it peacefully.
The literature on loneliness most clearly speaks to the experience of the interviewees who choose the first response to the experience of loneliness—those who deny loneliness in their relationships. The literature suggests that no one who participated in my study should feel lonely. The implication, therefore, is that if they do feel lonely, then perhaps the relationship does not constitute terribly good intimacy. People who deny loneliness deal with loneliness as if the cultural conversation on intimacy were true—as if the presence of loneliness indicates a weak intimate connection. Perhaps denial is a way to protect the relationship. But in acting as if loneliness is a negative experience, some people may be affecting their relationships negatively in other ways—at the very least, because of this view, they are "learning" that their relationships are not perfect.

Both the people who articulated a struggle and those who accepted loneliness in the relationship do not have a place within the literature on loneliness; their attempts to describe their experience add to the loneliness literature because they seem not to buy into the cultural definitions of the construct. Instead, they are attempting to make sense of loneliness in a new way—in a way that suggests that its presence is not entirely negative. By looking upon loneliness as growth, these people indicated possible agreement with Moustakas's (1961) position that "man's inevitable and infinite loneliness is not solely an awful condition of human existence but . . . it is also the instrument through which man experiences new compassion and new beauty" (p. x).

In short, the feeling of relational loneliness exists for some people. People have different responses to it, and their attributions for the origin of the experience are based on those responses. Consistent with these themes
and this theory and illustrating a viewpoint that has been absent from
communication literature on loneliness, Moustakas (1961) said:

> efforts to overcome or escape the existential experience of loneliness
can result only in self-alienation. When man is removed from a
fundamental truth of life, when he successfully evades and denies the
terrible loneliness of individual existence, he shuts himself off from
one significant avenue of his own growth. (p. ix)

Relational loneliness, then, can be viewed as an opportunity to learn about
ourselves, relationships and relating in general. For this to happen, however,
particular responses must be selected for dealing with the experience—either
struggle or acceptance of an opportunity for growth. The result is a
recognition of the nature of actual intimate relationships—both their
limitations and their joys—even though the experience of the actual
relationship contradicts cultural expectations.

Suggestions for Future Research

I have three specific suggestions for future research. First, additional
studies might focus on the experience of those who struggle with relational
loneliness. Those who deny and those who accept loneliness have much
clearer attributions for their own felt loneliness than those who struggle.
Additional studies might focus on how these people come to terms with their
own struggle—how, in fact, they reconcile the tensions. Second, future studies
could add much to the conversation on loneliness and cultural influences. In
this study, I theorized that the influence of culture on relationships is great
and that the weight of that influence affects expectations of relationships and
experiences of loneliness. With these broad interview data, I could draw few
conclusions on how these participants' specific social identities interacted
with their expectations or experiences. Future studies, therefore, might begin

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with an explicit focus on social identities such as race, class, and sexual orientation. Third, researchers might address links between and among the different options for responding to loneliness, communication behavior, and satisfaction with the relationship. I can speculate that those links exist, but this study does not provide enough evidence to make any claims in that regard.

This study is simply one small step to a much-needed understanding of the experience of relational loneliness. I hope that researchers will continue to explore the phenomenon so that its influence on relationships is understood in all of its complexity—not simply as a potential indicator of lack of connection but also as a catalyst for growth.
APPENDIX A
Invitation to Potential Participants

Bob Jones
123 Oak Lane
Elmhurst, OH 43230

Dear Bob:

My name is Sharon Varallo and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication at the Ohio State University. Jane Smith gave me your name as someone who may be interested in research I am conducting for my dissertation along with Sonja Foss, Associate Professor of Communication. In this letter, I'd like to introduce you to my research and briefly explain my search for interested participants.

In a nutshell, I will be interviewing people on the topic of intimate relationships and loneliness. I am looking for individuals (1) who consider themselves to be in good, healthy, committed, intimate relationships; (2) who have been together as a couple for at least six years; and (3) who do not currently have children living with them. First, it is important for me to interview people who consider themselves to be in good relationships because I want to address emotions or experiences felt within good intimacy. (Different people, of course, will have different ideas about what a "good" relationship is all about.) Second, I ask for people who have been in their romantic relationship for at least six years because many studies have indicated that the majority of deep relational difficulties will have been worked through by the sixth or seventh year of the relationship. Staying together for that long, then, is additional evidence of a couple's relational health. Third, ample research suggests that the presence of children significantly changes the nature of the intimate relationship. Since I am, in this research, focusing on the individual's perception of the intimate relationship, I have opted to interview only those who do not currently have children in their home.

I will be meeting individually with these women and men to discuss their ideas about good relationships and to ask general questions about their primary romantic relationship. Interview lengths will vary, but I estimate
they will take about one hour. The interviews will be conducted individually, and I need not necessarily interview both partners in the relationship. My dissertation will be based on an analysis of these in-depth personal interviews, which would be audiotaped and transcribed. The tapes will be kept completely confidential; any researcher who is transcribing the tapes will sign a confidentiality agreement.

I'm doing this research because I believe that people in good intimate relationships sometimes feel emotions that do not make sense to them. I do not believe that there is only one good way of being in a relationship, and I will not, in this research, in any way be judging people's relationships.

Lastly, I realize that this letter has come out of the blue, unsolicited. I understand that some people may not want to be interviewed for a multitude of reasons, including a simple lack of time. Although I hope for strong interest and participation, I fully respect your life circumstances—and, since these interviews are confidential, nobody except me will know if you responded or not! If you'd like to participate, if you have questions, or if you know someone who might be interested in participating, I'd appreciate hearing from you. Please feel free to call collect to my home (614-899-6872) where a recording will accept charges if I'm not there; e-mail me (varallo.1@osu.edu); or drop me a note in the mail to the address on this letterhead.

Contacting me in no way obligates you to participate. I am expecting to travel around quite a bit while conducting interviews, so if you are some distance from Columbus—up to a four hour drive—that is not necessarily a problem.

With sincere thanks,

Sharon Varallo
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Communication
(614) 899-6872

Sonja Foss
Associate Professor
Department of Communication
(614) 292-6342
CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS TO PARTICIPATE IN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH ON

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND LONELINESS

Are you in a good, healthy, committed, intimate relationship?

Have you been together as a couple for at least six years and do not currently have children living with you?

If yes, and you would like to be interviewed for a dissertation research study on intimacy, loneliness, and communication, please contact Sharon Varallo (from the Department of Communication, OSU):

- by phone (614) 899-6872
- or e-mail varallo.1@osu.edu

Interviews will vary, but may be approximately one hour.

Individuals in all types of committed romantic relationships are welcome and encouraged to participate.
APPENDIX C

Summary of Participants' Relationships

The names of people who were interviewed for this study are in bold. Unless otherwise noted, all partners are living together.

Anandi and Rustam, together for almost 6 years. Anandi is 29, of East Indian descent, has been in a heterosexual relationship with Rustam, 31, of East Indian descent, for almost 6 years, and they are married. Anandi and Rustam are both graduate students.

Bernice and Diane, together for 13 years. Bernice is 37, white, has been in a gay relationship with Diane, 42, for 13 years, and they have had a joining ceremony. Bernice is a social worker, and Diane is a self-employed retailer.

Beth and William, together for 10.5 years. Beth is 29, white, has been in a heterosexual relationship with William, 30, white, for 10.5 years, and they are married and are currently in a long-distance (dual household) living arrangement. Beth is a student, and William is a production manager.

Betsy and Greg, together for 8.5 or 10 years. Betsy is 44, white, has been in a heterosexual relationship with Greg, 48, white, for 8.5 or 10 years (they noted different starting points for the relationship), and they are married. Betsy is an environmental scientist, and Greg is a remodeling contractor.

Bob and Jack, together for 24 years. Bob is 44, white, has been in a gay relationship with Jack, 52, white, for 24 years. Bob runs a small business, and Jack is a retail manager.

Carrie and Doug, together for 10 years. Carrie is 29, white, has been in a heterosexual relationship with Doug, 28, for 10 years, and they are married. Carrie is a microbiologist, and Doug is a systems programmer.

Dot and Harold, together for 59 years. Dot is 79, white, has been in a heterosexual relationship with Harold, 85, white, for over 59 years, and they are married. Dot is a housewife, and Harold is retired.
Esther and Ezra, together for over 65 years. Esther is 80, white, has been in a heterosexual relationship with Ezra, 85, for over 65 years, and they have been married for 65 years. Esther is a housewife, and Ezra is retired.

Janice and Larry, together for 9 years. Janice is 54, white, has been in a heterosexual relationship with Larry, 59, white, for 9 years, and they are married. Janice is a professional in a non-profit organization, and Larry is a manager.

Joyce and Lorraine, together for 9 or 10.5 years. Joyce is 48, white, has been in a gay relationship with Lorraine, 54, white/Native American, for either 9 or 10.5 years (they openly disagree about the starting point of their relationship). Joyce is a job counselor, and Lorraine is a psychotherapist.

Kathryn and Mike, together for 9 years. Kathryn is 38, white, has been in a heterosexual relationship with Mike, 45, white, for 9 years. They live separately. Kathryn is an administrative secretary, and Mike is a delivery worker.

Laurie and Zach, together for 11 years. Laurie is 32, white, has been in a heterosexual relationship with Zach, 32, white, for 11 years, and they are married. Laurie is a banker, and Zach is a dentist.

Lewis and Marguerite, together for 8 years. Lewis is 37, white, has been in a heterosexual relationship with Marguerite, 29, white, for 8 years, and they are married. Lewis is a professor, and Marguerite is a advertising production manager.

Mallika and Jitender, together for 6 years. Mallika is 29, of East Indian descent, has been in a heterosexual relationship with Jitender, 30, of East Indian descent, for 6 years, and they are married. Mallika is a graduate student, and Jitender is an engineer.

Maria and Roberto, together for almost 6 years. Maria is 30, Latina, has been in a heterosexual relationship with Roberto, 31, Latino, for almost 6 years, and they are married. Maria is in the country to be with her husband, and is waiting for him to finish his graduate degree.

Nilash and Shravini, together for 7 years. Nilash is 30, of East Indian descent, has been in a heterosexual relationship with Shravini, 23, of East Indian descent, for 7 years. They live separately. Nilash and Shravini are both students.
Rhonda and Tim, together for 10 years. Rhonda is 25, white, has been in a heterosexual relationship with Tim, 30, white, for 10 years, and they are married. Rhonda is a purchasing agent, and Tim is a computer programmer.

Sheila and Jim, together for 21 years. Sheila is 44, white, has been in a heterosexual relationship with Jim, 59, for 21 years, and they are married. Sheila is a contracting agent, and Jim is a manager.

Thom and Victor, together for 15 years. Thom is 44, white, has been in a gay relationship with Victor, 34, white, for 15 years, and they have had a joining ceremony. Thom is a currently unemployed teacher, and Victor is a cosmetologist.

Wanda and Al, together for 30 years. Wanda is 70, white, has been in a heterosexual relationship with Al, 64, white, for 30 years, and they are married. Wanda is retired, and Al is a custodian.
APPENDIX D
Demographics of the Sample

Age of Participants: (total of 29 participants)
   Mean: 41 years
   Range: 25 to 80 years

Time Spent in This Relationship: (total of 19 diff relationships)
   Mean: 17 years
   Range: 6 to 65 years

Breakdown by Sex:
   Males: 10
   Females: 19

Breakdown by Sexual Orientation/Sex:
   Heterosexuals: 22
      Female: 15
      Male: 7
   Homosexuals: 7
      Female: 4
      Male: 3

Breakdown by Race:
   White: 25
   Asian: 3
   Latino: 1
APPENDIX E

Consent Form

Protocol No. 96B0109

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. As you are aware, I am a doctoral candidate at Ohio State University, and I am writing a dissertation presently titled Loneliness Within Intimacy. This spring, I will be meeting individually with women and men to discuss ideas about good relationships. In this interview, I will be asking you general questions about your primary romantic relationship. This interview can be as long or as short as you wish; I estimate that interviews will last about 60 minutes.

I'm doing this research because I believe that people in good intimate relationships sometimes feel emotions that do not always make sense to them; through this research analysis, I hope to make sense of these emotions, and in so doing, help expand current definitions of intimate relationships. I am hoping for your gut-level ideas about your relationship, so if our talk seems to go in circles, or even seems contradictory, that's okay. I do not believe that there is only one good way of being in a relationship, and I will not, in this research, in any way be judging you.

My dissertation will be based on an analysis of many interviews like this one. I would like to audiotape this interview and transcribe the conversation for my analysis. The audiotapes will be kept completely confidential—the only people who will have access to the tapes will be the researchers and/or a research associate helping to transcribe the tapes. If you would like, I will give the cassette tape to you when this research is completed in late summer; otherwise, I will erase the tape.

The interview questions are designed to let you talk about what you think is most important. If anytime during the interview you would like to stop, please let me know. You are under no obligation to participate, and I will be grateful for your honesty.
If you have questions or concerns at any time after the interview, feel free to contact me or the supervising professor, Dr. Sonja Foss:

Sharon M. Varallo (interviewer)  
Department of Communication  
3016 Derby Hall, 154 N. Oval Mall  
Ohio State University  
Columbus, Ohio 43210  
(614) 292-3400 (o); 899-6872 (h)  
varallo.1@osu.edu

Dr. Sonja Foss (adviser)  
Department of Communication  
3016 Derby Hall, 154 N. Oval  
Ohio State University  
Columbus, Ohio 43210  
(614) 292-6342 (office)  
foss.1@osu.edu

Please sign both copies of this form indicating that you understand how this interview will proceed, and keep one copy for yourself. If you have any further insights, comments or questions after we complete this interview, feel free to call at any time.

Signature ____________________________

Printed Name __________________________

Date __________________________

Interviewer Signature __________________
APPENDIX F

Personal Profile

First name ____________________________

About You:

Age: _______ Sex: ___ Female ___ Male

Race: ___ Black ___ White ___ Latino ___ American Indian

___ Asian or Pacific Islander ___ Other: _______________________

Do you practice a religion? ___ yes ___ no ___ sometimes

If so, what religion? ____________________________

Please check off the educational level you have attained to date:

___ grade school ___ associate's degree ___ professional degree

___ high school ___ bachelor's degree ___ doctoral degree

___ some college ___ master's degree

Please describe your occupation: ___________________________________

______________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________
About Your Romantic Partner:

Partner's First Name: ______________________

Age: ________ Sex: ___ Female ___ Male

Race: ___ Black ___ White ___ Latino ___ American Indian
___ Asian or Pacific Islander ___ Other: ______________________

Does your partner practice a religion? ___ yes ___ no ___ sometimes

If so, what religion? ______________________

Please check off the educational level your partner has attained to date:
___ grade school ___ associate's degree ___ professional degree
___ high school ___ bachelor's degree ___ doctoral degree
___ some college ___ master's degree

Please describe your partner's occupation: ______________________

______________________________

About the Two of You:

How long have you been together as a couple? ______________________

______________________________

Do you live together? ___ yes ___ no ___ sometimes

If you sometimes live together and sometimes apart during a typical year,
please explain your living schedule: ______________________

______________________________
Have you had a marriage or joining ceremony? __________________________

How important is a marriage or joining ceremony to you? __________________________

How important do you think it is to your partner? __________________________

Participants' names are usually changed in research papers. However, some interviewees prefer that I use their real name. Initial here if you prefer that I use your real first name. ____ [I will change your partner's name, since I do not have his or her explicit permission.]
APPENDIX G
Interview Protocol

In general, how would you describe your outlook on life? For example, would you call yourself optimistic, or pessimistic, or _____?

In general, how would you describe your relationship with X to me so that I might understand it?

Do you have what you consider a sufficient network of friends accessible to you? Do you have what you consider sufficient access to your family members? Does your partner?

To what extent do your friends and family support your romantic relationship? How important is that to you?

You volunteered for this study that called for people who are "good, healthy, committed intimate relationships." What are some of the things about your relationship that might help explain why you feel your relationship is good? And what do you mean by "committed"?

Is there anything else about your relationship that you feel is particularly important?

Please describe your communication with your partner.

I'm going to move on to something a little different now. Can you explain to me what "feeling lonely" in general means for you? What does it mean to "feel lonely"?

Can you describe a time at any point in your life when you felt that way?

In my work, I am particularly interested in loneliness and in whether people who are in great relationships feel loneliness the same way we do when we're
not in relationships at all. Can you recall a time inside this good relationship when you felt any of those ways that you described to me as lonely ways?

If yes, how did you respond to that feeling?
To yourself, did you call that feeling loneliness or something different?
Have you ever discussed this with your partner? If yes, what was the reaction?

If no, can you imagine a time when you might feel those ways?

I believe that in romantic relationships, we feel things that sometimes we think we’re not supposed to feel, that don’t make sense to us. If that happens to you sometimes, do you typically talk to your partner about it?

Is there anything we haven’t mentioned—related to communication and loneliness and your relationship—that springs to mind as important?
Dear ______________________:

My name is Sharon Varallo and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication at the Ohio State University. _________________ gave me your name as someone who may be interested in research I am conducting for my dissertation along with Sonja Foss, Associate Professor of Communication. In this letter, I'd like to introduce you to my research and briefly explain my search for interested participants.

In a nutshell, I will be interviewing people on the topic of intimate relationships and loneliness. I am looking for individuals who consider themselves to be in good, healthy, committed, intimate relationships; who have been together as a couple for at least six years; and who do not currently have children living with them. First, it is important for me to interview people who consider themselves to be in good relationships because I want to address emotions or experiences felt within good intimacy. Different people will have different ideas about what a "good" relationship is all about, and each participant will be asked about their ideas on what constitutes a good relationship. Second, I ask for people who have been in their romantic relationship for at least six years because many different studies have indicated that the majority of deep relational difficulties will have been worked through by the sixth or seventh year of the relationship. Staying together for that long, then, is additional evidence of a couple's relational health. Third, I stipulate that these individuals not have children currently living with them because ample research suggests that the presence of children significantly changes the nature of the intimate relationship. Since I am, in this research, focusing on the individual's perception of the intimate relationship, I have opted to interview only those who do not currently have children in their home.

I will be meeting individually with these women and men to discuss their ideas about good relationships and to ask general questions about their primary romantic relationship. Interview lengths will vary, but I estimate they will take about one hour. The interviews will be conducted individually, and I need not necessarily interview both partners in the relationship. My dissertation will be based on an analysis of these in-depth
personal interviews, which would be audiotaped and transcribed. The tapes will be kept completely confidential; any researcher who is transcribing the tapes will sign a confidentiality agreement.

I'm doing this research because I believe that people in good intimate relationships sometimes feel emotions that do not make sense to them. I do not believe that there is only one good way of being in a relationship, and I will not, in this research, in any way be judging people's relationships.

Lastly, I realize that this letter has come out of the blue, unsolicited. I understand that some people may not want to be interviewed for a multitude of reasons, including a simple lack of time. Although I hope for strong interest and participation, I fully respect your life circumstances—and, since these interviews are confidential, nobody except me will know if you responded or not! If you'd like to participate, if you have questions, or if you know someone who might be interested in participating, I'd appreciate hearing from you. Please feel free to call collect to my home (614-899-6872) where a recording will accept charges if I'm not there; e-mail me (varallo.1@osu.edu); or drop me a note in the mail to the address on this letterhead.

Contacting me in no way obligates you to participate. I am expecting to travel around quite a bit while conducting interviews, so if you are some distance from Columbus—up to a four hour drive—that is not necessarily a problem.

With sincere thanks,

Sharon Varallo
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Communication
(614) 899-6872

Sonja Foss
Associate Professor
Department of Communication
(614) 292-6342
APPENDIX I
Followup Form

Thank you again! I appreciate your sharing your personal life and your insights with me. If you are interested, I'd like to share my insights with you.

When I have completed all of my interviews and my analysis of them, which likely will take several months, I will schedule an open, optional meeting for all of the volunteers. If you are interested in the results of this study, I'd like to share them with you and hear your comments.

I imagine this meeting will take place during the summer months. If you would like to receive notification about this meeting, I will contact you to inform you about the date and location.

Yes, I would like to know about this optional meeting.

If yes, please indicate how to contact you (by phone, letter, e-mail):

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

If yes, when might be a good time to meet (evenings, weekdays, weekends)?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

No, I do not wish to know about this optional meeting.

Please sign both copies and keep one for yourself.

Signature ____________________________
Printed Name ____________________________
Date ____________________________

Interviewer Signature ________________

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LIST OF REFERENCES


