

## TRANSITION TO COLLEGE: NETWORK CHANGES, SOCIAL SKILLS, AND LONELINESS

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A great deal has been written recently about the importance of social relationships and social support in maintaining mental and physical health (e.g., Laudenslager & Reite, in press; Reis, 1984; Rook, in press). Especially when people are forced to undergo stress, social support is beneficial, 'buffering' them from the full force of their difficulties and thus reducing symptoms and complaints. But what of times — following a change of occupation, for example, a move from one school to another, or a geographical relocation — when the stress experienced is itself due, at least in part, to changes in a person's social support system? At such times the person is called upon to create new relationships, decide whether and how to maintain contact with old network members, and cope with feelings of loss and loneliness. We would expect a premium to be placed at these times on personality characteristics, such as social skills and coping strategies, which allow the person to combat negative feelings while building new supportive relationships.

Network disruptions can occur at any point in the life cycle. Connell & Furman (1983) have described, for example, the disorientation that occurs during the transition from elementary to junior high school. Children who formerly felt in control of their lives, and aware of the causes of their social and academic successes and failures, are suddenly forced to confront the onset of puberty, new academic demands, and (of most interest here) new classmates, social pressures and social norms. Faced with these challenges, many children become measurably bewildered and distressed. At the other end of the age spectrum, elderly Americans frequently find it necessary to move from a familiar home to an unfamiliar institution. In a recent study of that transition, Lieberman & Tobin (1983) found that half their elderly subjects — many more than in a comparable

control group — were 'dead, physically impaired, or psychologically deteriorated' a year after relocation.

A common finding in life-transition studies is that, despite the generally disruptive nature of the life change in question, some individuals fare much better than others. While some are taxed to the point of illness or despair, others cope vigorously and quickly rebuild supportive social networks and satisfying life structures. In order to understand socially significant life transitions and find ways to deal effectively with them, we need a more detailed picture of both the general network changes involved and the personality characteristics associated with successful and unsuccessful adjustment.

The life transition of main concern here, the transition from high school to college, is especially interesting from a social research standpoint because it marks not only a qualitative step forward in the educational system (like the transition from elementary to junior high school) but also, for many students, the first significant move away from the family home (Coelho et al., 1963; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969). This creates network perturbations both ahead and behind, so to speak; the college freshman is forced not only to build a new social support system but also to renegotiate relations with family and friends back home. Freshmen typically establish residence in dormitories, social clubs, or apartments, and from there begin to explore a new world of personal relationships, organizational commitments, and social attitudes and values. Studies by Newcomb and his colleagues (e.g. Newcomb et al., 1967) confirm what many of us know from experience — that friendships, commitments and value changes established during the college years can last a lifetime. For many reasons, then, this is a transition deserving of careful study, but it is one that has received surprisingly little attention.

Cutrona's (1982) study of freshmen at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), the starting point for our own investigation, documented an interesting feature of college life which will probably ring a bell for anyone who can still remember that first fateful year away from home. The freshmen in her sample tended to be lonely in the autumn, but most of them had recovered by the end of freshman year — an improvement that can be traced to the formation of new friendship networks. Cutrona noted, however, that about one-fifth of her subjects remained lonely all year, a fifth that were identifiable from the start because of their tendency to attribute loneliness to personal (or internal) rather than situational (or external) causes.

That is, they blamed themselves for their loneliness rather than blaming the transition. (For discussions of the role of attributions in exacerbating and prolonging loneliness, see Peplau et al., 1979; 1982.)

Finally, Cutrona found, in line with other recent investigations (reviewed in Peplau & Perlman, 1982), that the perceived *quality* of friendships and romances was a better predictor of loneliness than were quantitative indices such as number of friends and number of dates. This fits with the increasingly well-supported hypothesis that intimacy and other qualitative 'provisions' of social life (Weiss, 1974) are more important than interaction *quantity* in dispelling loneliness (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982a; 1982b; Williams & Solano, 1983; Wheeler et al., 1983).

Cutrona's study was path-breaking in several respects. It called attention to the value of studying social networks and socially generated emotions longitudinally; it emphasized the importance of establishing new friendships during disruptive transition periods; and it began to identify individual differences that moderate the relationship between social disruption and subsequent adaptation. The study left important questions unanswered, however: what happened to the UCLA freshmen's pre-college social networks? How much contact did the students have with friends and relatives back home, and were these contacts helpful in alleviating loneliness and other forms of distress? How were new social networks constructed? Did most students find a few good friends in the autumn and stick with them all year, or were the new networks repeatedly evaluated and found in need of improvement? Who were the people that remained lonely all year? Is it possible to discover some of the reasons for their seemingly self-defeating attribution patterns? Could these students have been identified even before they came to college? These are some of the questions that prompted us to undertake an elaborate replication and extension of Cutrona's study.

In summer 1980, more than a month before school started, we surveyed 400 members of the University of Denver's entering freshman class. Our questionnaire asked about current relationships, previous transition periods, family background, state and trait loneliness, social skills, typical attributions following social successes and failures, and strategies for coping with loneliness. (Measures relevant to this chapter will be described in more detail as we proceed.) In each of the three academic quarters — autumn, winter and spring — we attempted to recontact the same students to

see how they were feeling, how they were getting along with both old and new members of their social networks, how their romantic ties were changing, and so on. We were able to capture between 200 and 300 each time, but here will focus only on the 166 who completed all four questionnaires. (Comparative analyses revealed no important differences between them and the students who failed to respond at one time or another, usually because of pressing examinations, papers, and so on.)

Our presentation of findings is divided into five sections. In the first, we examine ways in which the typical student's social network changed as a result of leaving home to enter college. Second, we report changes in relationship satisfaction, state loneliness, and reported difficulty of the transition across the various time periods. Third, we explore the role of social skills in promoting relationship satisfaction and combating loneliness. Fourth, we examine personality correlates of social skills, including attributions, coping styles and trait loneliness. Fifth, paying particular attention to continuities and changes, we show how trait loneliness and social skills relate to network satisfaction and state loneliness at different points in the transition process. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our results for future work on life transitions, social networks, person-situation interactions, and the distinction between state and trait loneliness.

### Network changes

In each of the four periods—summer, autumn, winter and spring—we asked about both quantitative and qualitative aspects of social relations. Table 1 summarizes some of the major changes. Scanning the rows in the table we observe three recurring patterns: old relationships decline, both in number and in perceived quality. New relationships develop and, on the average, improve in quality, although most never reach pre-college satisfaction levels. Indices related to both old and new relationships (e.g., number of organizational memberships, overall network satisfaction) decline dramatically in the autumn and rise again by spring, but like indicators of new relationships, generally fail to return to pre-college levels.

The changes are quite marked for friendships, romances and participation in organizations, but are less striking for friendship cliques. Apparently, close dyadic relationships take considerable

TABLE 1  
Social network changes

	Time			
	Summer	Autumn	Winter	Spring
<i>Friendships</i>				
Number of 'old' friends	6.00 <sup>a</sup>	—	4.83 <sup>b</sup>	5.13 <sup>ab</sup>
Number of 'new' friends	—	3.45 <sup>a</sup>	4.49 <sup>b</sup>	4.50 <sup>b</sup>
Satisfaction with 'old' friendships	4.52 <sup>a</sup>	4.26 <sup>b</sup>	4.09 <sup>c</sup>	3.98 <sup>c</sup>
Satisfaction with 'new' friendships	—	4.09 <sup>a</sup>	4.25 <sup>b</sup>	4.21 <sup>ab</sup>
<i>Friendship cliques</i>				
Number in clique	5.77 <sup>a</sup>	5.38 <sup>a</sup>	5.15 <sup>a</sup>	5.62 <sup>a</sup>
Satisfaction with clique	4.19 <sup>a</sup>	4.06 <sup>a</sup>	4.11 <sup>a</sup>	4.19 <sup>a</sup>
Popularity	3.68 <sup>a</sup>	3.28 <sup>b</sup>	3.64 <sup>a</sup>	3.65 <sup>a</sup>
<i>Organizations</i>				
Number	3.26 <sup>a</sup>	1.37 <sup>b</sup>	1.43 <sup>b</sup>	1.86 <sup>c</sup>
Frequency of meetings	4.47 <sup>a</sup>	3.52 <sup>b</sup>	3.45 <sup>b</sup>	3.52 <sup>b</sup>
Satisfaction with organizations	4.15 <sup>a</sup>	3.64 <sup>b</sup>	3.66 <sup>b</sup>	3.66 <sup>b</sup>
<i>Romantic life</i>				
Dating frequency	3.64 <sup>a</sup>	3.20 <sup>b</sup>	3.34 <sup>b</sup>	3.66 <sup>a</sup>
Satisfaction with 'old' romantic relationships	4.28 <sup>a</sup>	3.96 <sup>b</sup>	3.50 <sup>c</sup>	3.45 <sup>c</sup>
Satisfaction with 'new' romantic relationships	—	2.98 <sup>a</sup>	3.17 <sup>b</sup>	3.57 <sup>b</sup>
<i>Overall</i>				
Overall network satisfaction	4.22 <sup>a</sup>	3.83 <sup>b</sup>	3.91 <sup>b</sup>	3.98 <sup>b</sup>

### Note

'Old' refers to relationships established before college; 'new' to relationships established at the university. Ratings of satisfaction are on 1-5 scales with higher scores reflecting greater satisfaction. Numbers with different superscripts are significantly different,  $p < 0.05$ .

time to develop, whereas students are fairly quickly able to establish a new group of casual acquaintances. Despite the seeming ease of clique formation, students feel less 'popular' in the autumn than before coming to college, suggesting that they perceive their role in the new friendship clique as somewhat peripheral or uncertain.

Subjects were also asked to rate their relationships with family members, and with pre-college boyfriends or girlfriends, in terms of fourteen characteristics. These characteristics were then combined on the basis of a priori considerations to form five reliable multi-item scales: affection, intimacy, support (instrumental help), companionship and conflict. In addition, subjects rated their overall satisfaction with each of these relationships. The four positive characteristics — that is, all except conflict — correlated positively with each other, but their correlations with conflict were all near zero. In other words, conflict does not appear to jeopardize well-established relationships. (For related findings from studies of engaged couples and siblings, respectively, see Braiker & Kelley [1979] and Furman & Buhrmester [1983, unpub.].)

Table 2 shows what happened over time to relationships with certain family members: father, mother and closest sibling. Ratings on most of the positive dimensions increased during the transition, while ratings of conflict decreased. In order to find out whether this relationship-enhancement effect was somehow due to moving a long way from home, we compared results for three different groups: those from the immediate Denver area, those from the Colorado region, excluding Denver, and those from outside the Colorado region. We found no significant differences. Even the seventeen students who continued to live at home reported improved relations with siblings and mother, although not with father.

What could account for this unexpected improvement? The findings seem to reflect subjective rather than objective changes, because increases were observed for almost all variables, including 'companionship', which surely must have decreased for the vast majority of subjects. Perhaps the new status of 'grown-up college student' made it easier to interact with parents, or maybe the difficulty of building a new network of relationships caused students to appreciate the stability of their ties to family. As we will show in a moment, it could not have been a simple case of 'absence makes the heart grow fonder', because the heart did not grow fonder for pre-college friendships and romances. Besides, as we have mentioned, the perceived change for the better occurred even for family relations of students who were not 'absent' from home. (For a possible explanation based on the concept of 'separation-individuation', see Pipp et al., 1983, unpub.)

By contrast with its effect on family relations, the transition had a devastating effect on pre-college romantic relationships. Forty-six percent of them fell by the wayside during our nine-month study.

TABLE 2  
Changes in previously existing relationships

	Summer	Time Winter	Spring
<i>Mother</i>			
Affection	5.76 <sup>a</sup>	6.15 <sup>b</sup>	6.17 <sup>b</sup>
Intimacy	5.39 <sup>a</sup>	5.75 <sup>b</sup>	5.77 <sup>b</sup>
Support	6.19 <sup>a</sup>	6.26 <sup>a</sup>	6.22 <sup>a</sup>
Companionship	5.23 <sup>a</sup>	5.32 <sup>a</sup>	5.44 <sup>a</sup>
Conflict	4.47 <sup>a</sup>	3.91 <sup>b</sup>	3.93 <sup>b</sup>
Satisfaction	4.56 <sup>a</sup>	4.54 <sup>a</sup>	4.55 <sup>a</sup>
<i>Father</i>			
Affection	5.11 <sup>a</sup>	5.66 <sup>b</sup>	5.55 <sup>b</sup>
Intimacy	4.58 <sup>a</sup>	5.14 <sup>b</sup>	4.99 <sup>b</sup>
Support	5.77 <sup>a</sup>	5.98 <sup>a</sup>	5.89 <sup>a</sup>
Companionship	4.68 <sup>a</sup>	4.95 <sup>b</sup>	4.96 <sup>b</sup>
Conflict	4.53 <sup>a</sup>	3.99 <sup>b</sup>	4.01 <sup>b</sup>
Satisfaction	3.97 <sup>a</sup>	4.35 <sup>b</sup>	4.26 <sup>b</sup>
<i>Sibling</i>			
Affection	5.25 <sup>a</sup>	—	5.80 <sup>b</sup>
Intimacy	5.26 <sup>a</sup>	—	5.75 <sup>b</sup>
Support	5.10 <sup>a</sup>	—	5.36 <sup>b</sup>
Companionship	5.14 <sup>a</sup>	—	5.37 <sup>b</sup>
Conflict	4.19 <sup>a</sup>	—	3.69 <sup>b</sup>
Satisfaction	4.23 <sup>a</sup>	—	4.35 <sup>a</sup>
<i>Lasting pre-college romance</i>			
Affection	6.63 <sup>a</sup>	6.24 <sup>b</sup>	6.16 <sup>b</sup>
Intimacy	6.51 <sup>a</sup>	6.21 <sup>ab</sup>	6.07 <sup>b</sup>
Support	5.74 <sup>a</sup>	5.63 <sup>a</sup>	5.38 <sup>a</sup>
Companionship	6.36 <sup>a</sup>	5.76 <sup>b</sup>	5.81 <sup>b</sup>
Conflict	3.11 <sup>a</sup>	3.16 <sup>a</sup>	3.36 <sup>a</sup>
Satisfaction	4.16 <sup>a</sup>	3.92 <sup>a</sup>	3.86 <sup>a</sup>
<i>Non-lasting pre-college romance</i>			
Affection	6.52 <sup>a</sup>	4.58 <sup>b</sup>	—
Intimacy	6.46 <sup>a</sup>	4.80 <sup>b</sup>	—
Support	5.56 <sup>a</sup>	4.35 <sup>a</sup>	—
Companionship	6.25 <sup>a</sup>	4.65 <sup>a</sup>	—
Conflict	3.47 <sup>a</sup>	3.65 <sup>b</sup>	—
Satisfaction	4.29 <sup>a</sup>	2.84 <sup>a</sup>	—

Note

Scores are mean item ratings on 1–7 scales for all characteristics except satisfaction, which was rated on a 1–5 scale. Higher scores indicate more of the characteristic. 'Lasting' romances are ones that continued through the spring; 'non-lasting' are those in which a break-up occurred between fall and winter. Numbers with different superscripts are significantly different,  $p$ 's < 0.05.



Table 2 presents ratings of these failed relationships, and of the 54 percent that survived. Not surprisingly, the failed relationships were described in much less positive terms in the winter than they had been in the summer. More interesting, the *lasting* romances also received less positive ratings by winter, suggesting that — far from making the heart grow fonder — the high school to college transition produced strain in most romantic relationships.

We performed a number of analyses to see whether summer ratings were predictive of later relationship survival, and found that they were not. Assuming our scales were adequately sensitive, this probably means that many students whose relationships were doomed had no inkling of that fact when they left home for college at the end of summer. We found evidence for this interpretation in the explanations students provided when asked why their pre-college romantic relationships broke up. Although some mentioned gradual waning — for example: 'After a while, the thrill was just gone' — others described specific incidents or turning points which had not been anticipated: 'I found out that she was two-timing me.' 'After I left home I discovered what a jerk he really was.' 'My old relationship was okay, but during the first month at the University I met someone who seems to suit me a lot better.'

There are at least four ways to think about the abrupt demise of so many romances. First, they may have suffered from communication deficits common among late adolescents. Our impression, admittedly sketchy at this point, is that many dating partners knew surprisingly little about each other. Their inadequate communication could probably have been objectively documented, as Markman (1981) has done in his studies of couples planning marriage. Second, it is likely that relationship partners, regardless of age and communication skills, can perceive their relationships as satisfactory until confronted with an appealing alternative (see Thibaut & Kelley's concept, 'comparison level for alternatives' [1959]). This seems especially likely to happen when one or both partners change their social environment, thereby opening the door to a host of new options. Third, perhaps late adolescents do not really expect their romantic relationships to last; perhaps longevity is not particularly valued at that age. And finally, many relationship events are simply not predictable from such general qualities as companionship and conflict. As psychologists have begun to realize (e.g., Bandura, 1982; Meehl, 1978), life is full of unexpected events and chance encounters, some of which can be crucial to the development of a relationship — indeed, to the determination of an

entire life course. This suggests that relationship research requires, in addition to periodic assessment of relationship qualities, a life-history or critical-events assessment procedure.

We had expected to analyse the development of new romantic ties during the freshman year, but they proved to be too slow in starting and too evanescent once begun. Only twenty-two students (13 percent of the sample) established a new romantic relationship early in the autumn quarter, and of these only five survived the year. Thirty-eight additional students established a relationship by winter, and twenty-six more did so by spring, half of which lasted less than an academic quarter, indicating that stable romance is a rare commodity during this particular transition.

Questions about close friendship revealed that fully 97 percent of the sample met someone during the autumn quarter whom they were willing to call their 'new closest friend'. Table 3 summarizes the results of longitudinal analyses of these relationships. As indicated in the table, fifty-two of the initial 'closest' friends retained that designation all year, fifty-eight fell from that position before the winter questionnaire was distributed, and fifty-two more were 'demoted' between winter and spring. Although not particularly surprising, these results provide further evidence for the instability of freshmen's new networks.

Lasting closest friendships were associated with significant increases in affection, support and conflict. Companionship, judged to be very high from the start, had no room to increase (with initial means above 6 on a 7-point scale), suggesting that it may have been the first feature of budding close friendships to emerge. Intimacy also increased over time, but not quite significantly. The failure of this relationship feature to exhibit greater improvement may have been due to the inclusion of items referring to fairly superficial forms of intimacy (e.g. 'talking about daily experiences').

The increase in conflict suggests that conflict is not necessarily destructive, at least if kept below certain levels. Indeed, conflict may be a natural component of close relationships which is suppressed or avoided early in the process of relationship development but allowed to emerge gradually as increasing relationship strength renders it tolerable.

Not surprisingly, the close friendships that receded in importance were characterized by significant decreases on most of the positive quality dimensions and marked increases in conflict. As with romantic relationships, it was impossible to predict on the basis of autumn ratings which friendships would last and which would

TABLE 3  
Development of new closest friendships

	Autumn	Time Winter	Spring
<i>Lasted through Spring (N=52)</i>			
Affection	4.85 <sup>a</sup>	5.11 <sup>ab</sup>	5.35 <sup>b</sup>
Intimacy	5.69 <sup>a</sup>	5.84 <sup>a</sup>	5.82 <sup>a</sup>
Support	5.20 <sup>a</sup>	5.43 <sup>ab</sup>	5.63 <sup>b</sup>
Companionship	6.08 <sup>a</sup>	6.11 <sup>a</sup>	6.09 <sup>a</sup>
Conflict	2.09 <sup>a</sup>	2.48 <sup>b</sup>	2.78 <sup>b</sup>
<i>Lasted until winter (N=52) and then declined</i>			
Affection	5.05 <sup>a</sup>	5.16 <sup>a</sup>	4.73 <sup>a</sup>
Intimacy	5.71 <sup>a</sup>	5.68 <sup>a</sup>	5.29 <sup>a</sup>
Support	5.30 <sup>a</sup>	5.33 <sup>a</sup>	4.72 <sup>a</sup>
Companionship	5.94 <sup>a</sup>	5.86 <sup>a</sup>	5.21 <sup>b</sup>
Conflict	2.35 <sup>a</sup>	3.21 <sup>b</sup>	3.31 <sup>b</sup>
<i>Declined before winter (N=58)</i>			
Affection	4.63 <sup>a</sup>	2.78 <sup>b</sup>	—
Intimacy	5.50 <sup>a</sup>	3.50 <sup>b</sup>	—
Support	5.01 <sup>a</sup>	3.20 <sup>b</sup>	—
Companionship	5.65 <sup>a</sup>	3.32 <sup>b</sup>	—
Conflict	2.38 <sup>a</sup>	2.80 <sup>a</sup>	—

*Note*

Scores are item means on 1–7 scales. Higher scores indicate more of the characteristic. Scores marked with different superscripts are significantly different,  $p < 0.05$ .

decline in importance, although conflict was lower in all three periods for the lasting relationships.

Taken together, the network changes revealed by longitudinal questioning amount to a significant upheaval in the typical freshman's social life. Old friendships and love affairs tended to wither, many new relationships failed to last, and organizational ties were broken faster than they were replaced. Although the disruption was most noticeable between summer and autumn, some relationship indicators failed to return to pre-college levels even by spring quarter, suggesting that the transition period lasted longer than the first academic year. Relationships with family members reportedly became more satisfying, but it seems unlikely that this improvement, even if genuine, could make up for problems in other

areas of the students' social networks. That issue will be the subject of the following section.

### Indications of strain

If the autumn-quarter drop in peer-relationship satisfaction was emotionally significant, state loneliness scores should reflect that fact. State loneliness was measured by a highly reliable 11-item scale containing eight items from the UCLA scale (Russell, 1982) and three from the NYU scale (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982a, 1982b). All eleven items were rephrased slightly so that they referred to loneliness 'during the past few days'.

As expected, state loneliness changed over time in a highly significant way, paralleling — in mirror image form — changes in peer-relationship satisfaction. As satisfaction fell between summer and autumn, state loneliness surged; and as new and satisfying relationships became stabilized, loneliness declined. (By spring quarter it was a little below the pre-college baseline.) These results replicate Cutrona's (1982).

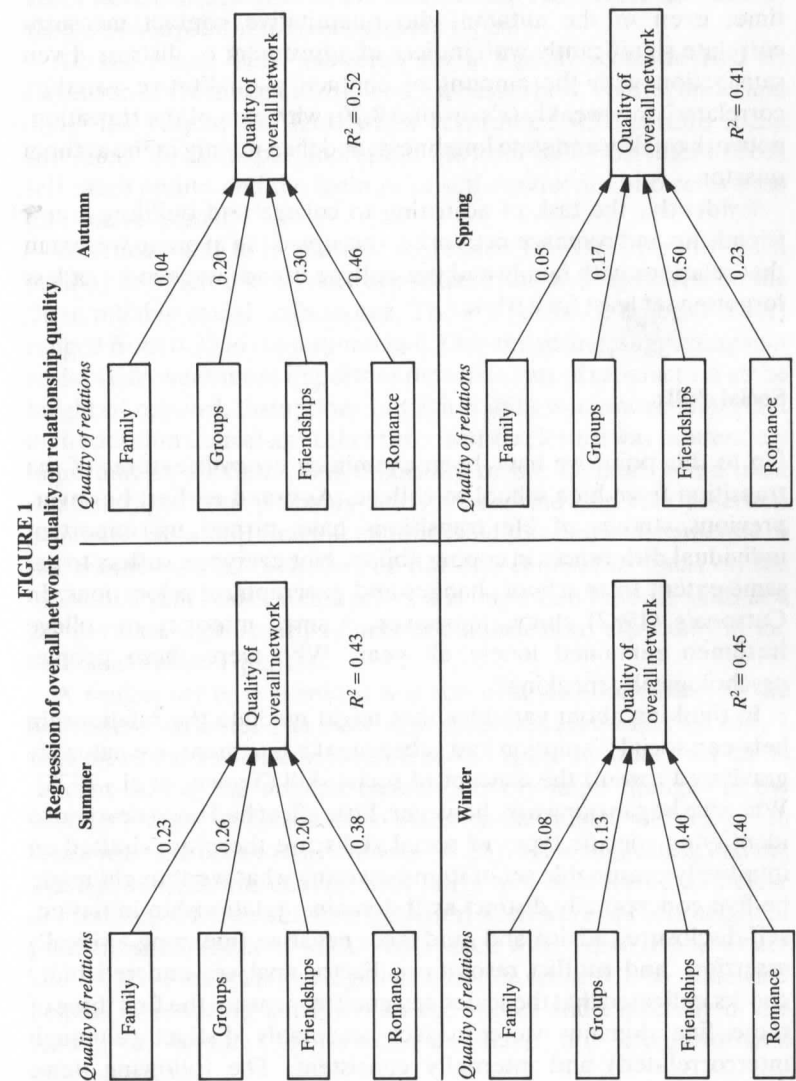
Although sex differences were not predicted, the rise in state loneliness, as well as some of the general changes in network satisfaction presented earlier, were much more dramatic for men than women. In fact, the increase in state loneliness between summer and autumn was four times greater for men than women, and their dating frequency declined significantly more. Men were also less satisfied in all four periods with their romances and friendships, and described both their new and old closest friendships less positively than women described theirs. Interestingly, there were no sex differences in ratings of groups and cliques, forms of social relationship which might be described as not very 'close' or 'intimate'. Although men's dating problems were probably due partly to their smaller pool of available partners (a result of the cultural norm that encourages women but not men to date older as well as same-age members of the opposite sex), the pervasiveness of the sex difference suggests that men generally had a harder time establishing new close relationships, even with other men. This is compatible with recent findings and theoretical analyses indicating that masculinity is 'designed' for companionship and group life, whereas femininity is 'designed' for intimacy (e.g., Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982b).

There is another indication in the data that the transition to college

was experienced as stressful, especially by men. In each of the three academic quarters we asked subjects to say directly, in terms of a 5-point scale, how easy or difficult the transition was. In the summer we had asked, using the same answer categories, how easy or difficult various childhood geographical moves and transitions had been, including the transitions from elementary to junior high school and from junior high to high school. Two features of the results warrant discussion. First, the transition from high school to college was rated as significantly more difficult than any of the earlier moves and transitions, especially by men; and second, the transition to college was rated by both sexes as more difficult in the autumn than in the winter or spring. In other words, when relationship satisfaction fell to a low point and state loneliness peaked, the transition to college was perceived as more difficult than any transition period previously encountered. As the subjects began to build new and satisfying relationships, however, their assessment of transition difficulty changed.

Overall, the results indicate that college freshmen, despite their new-found appreciation of family relationships are markedly affected by disruptions in their relationships with peers. The same point can be made in a different way (see Figure 1). We ran four multiple regression analyses, one for each period, in which subjects' ratings of overall network satisfaction (labelled 'quality' in the figure) were predicted from satisfaction with family, groups, friendships and romance. Notice that although the  $r^2$ 's are substantial for all four periods, the beta coefficients associated with different relationship categories change over time. Most relevant to the matter at hand is the significant drop in the coefficient for 'family' between summer (0.23) and autumn (0.04), followed by near-zero coefficients (0.08 and 0.05) in the winter and spring. Once at college, in other words, subjects gained little in the way of overall network satisfaction from relationships with family members. In contrast, the beta coefficient for friendships increased over time (0.20, 0.30, 0.40, 0.50), suggesting that new friendships, which we know were viewed with increasing satisfaction as the year progressed (Table 1), replaced old friendships and family relationships as major pillars of network satisfaction.

There are two other pieces of evidence for the rather surprising irrelevance of pre-college relationships. First, distance from home was totally unrelated to difficulty of the transition. Second, we recorded the number of contacts each quarter between the subjects who were not living at home and members of their pre-college





networks — contacts via letters, telephone calls and visits. Visits were infrequent all year, but calls and letters were very common in the autumn and progressively less so in the winter and spring. At no time, even in the autumn, did quantitative contact measures correlate significantly with indices of adjustment or distress. Even satisfaction with the amount of contact, a qualitative variable, correlated only weakly ( $r$ 's around 0.20) with ease of the transition, network quality and state loneliness, and then mainly in the autumn quarter.

Evidently, the task of adjusting to college and building a new friendship and romance network so occupied the average freshman that relations with family and pre-college friends were more or less forgotten, at least for a while.

### Social skills

Up to this point we have been examining *general* features of the transition from high school to college. As noted earlier, however, previous studies of life transitions have turned up important individual differences in coping ability. Not everyone suffers to the same extent from school changes and geographical relocations. In Cutrona's (1982) study, moreover, a small minority of college freshmen remained lonely all year. Who were these people, psychologically speaking?

In thinking about variables that might mediate the relationship between social disruption and subsequent adjustment, we naturally gravitated toward the concept of social skill (Trower et al., 1978). When we began our work, however, little effort had been devoted to identifying specific types of social skills; we therefore drafted an intuitively reasonable set of items covering what we thought might be five conceptually distinct skill domains: relationship initiation, self-disclosure, advice and guidance, negative (meaning 'critical') assertion, and conflict resolution. Factor analyses and reliability checks indicated that the scales designed to measure the first three of these five domains were in fact acceptably distinct (although intercorrelated) and internally consistent. The following items convey the flavour of these scales: 'Introducing yourself to someone you might like to get to know' (initiation), 'Revealing something private about yourself when talking to a close friend about personal matters' (self-disclosure), 'Asking someone you've been dating to change an irritating mannerism' (negative assertion). Each type of

question was asked with respect to both dating relationships and friendships, but factor analyses indicated that, although the skill areas were distinguishable, the relationship types were not, and so we have collapsed across relationship types.

All the items were answered on a 5-point scale devised by Levenson & Gottman (1978), which assesses how 'comfortable' and 'able' the respondent feels when confronted with certain social situations. In this paper, therefore, the term 'skill' will refer to both self-rated ability *and* the feelings of self-confidence and relaxation that derive from it.

We conducted four multiple regression analyses, one for each period, in which overall network satisfaction was regressed on the three reliable social skills scores. The  $r^2$ 's (variance accounted for) ranged from 0.33 in the autumn to 0.13 in the spring, suggesting that social skills were more important determinants of satisfaction at the height of network disruption. Initiation skills were more important in the autumn than at any other time; self-disclosure was moderately important at all times, but especially in the summer when most relationships were probably fairly close; and negative assertion proved to be unimportant at all times and somewhat detrimental in the winter quarter. Whether or not one chooses to focus on the individual skill scales at this point, it is important that the skills as a group relate significantly to network satisfaction, especially in the turbulent autumn quarter.

A similar set of regressions was run with state loneliness as the dependent variable. The three skill measures accounted for only 7 percent of the variance in loneliness during the summer, but for 39 percent during the autumn quarter, a very large change. In the summer, only self-disclosure skills made much difference in loneliness (the beta coefficient was  $-0.25$ ), again suggesting that the average subject was dealing with fairly well-established and close relationships. In the autumn, initiation skills were at their height of predictiveness (beta =  $-0.63$ , compared with  $-0.46$  in the winter and  $-0.25$  in the spring). Negative assertion seemed to be somewhat helpful in reducing loneliness in the winter and especially in the spring, a finding for which we have no straightforward interpretation.

Overall, although the skill measures were very brief and in a rather preliminary stage of development (see Buhrmester & Furman [1983, unpub.], for revised scales), forcing us to regard temporal changes in the relevance of particular skills as little more than suggestive, there is not much doubt that skills in general played an important role in



enhancing network satisfaction and overcoming loneliness during the transition. In the next section we place the social skills construct into a broader conceptual framework, showing how it helps explain Cutrona's (1982) discovery that chronically lonely students attribute their negative feelings to internal factors.

### Facets of the trait-lonely personality

Because Cutrona found that one-fifth of UCLA freshmen remained lonely throughout their first year of college, we became interested in the possibility that their loneliness was in some sense a personality trait, having little if anything to do with the transition from high school to college. If this is the correct interpretation, we think researchers should systematically draw a distinction between trait and state loneliness, a practice suggested in 1979 by Gerson & Perlman but rarely heeded since.

The trait-state distinction, familiar to anxiety researchers (e.g., Spielberger et al., 1970), could prove useful to relationship researchers interested in loneliness. Most of them believe, we suspect, that research has already demonstrated convincingly that 'lonely' people — who are implicitly portrayed as *state* lonely — display inadequate social skills (Jones, 1982), fail to follow normative patterns of self-disclosure (Solano et al., 1982), and make self-defeating causal attributions (Peplau et al., 1979; 1982). But what if these important findings are due to a trait-lonely minority who differ in important ways from their non-trait-lonely counterparts, the latter merely happening to be temporarily lonely at the time of testing? The UCLA loneliness scale, used by Jones, Solano, Peplau and their colleagues, does not make the trait-state distinction, nor does it provide a clear time perspective (e.g., 'I feel in tune with the people around me,' 'I am unhappy being so withdrawn'). Most of the items sound vaguely present-oriented, but a trait-lonely person could probably interpret them in chronic terms without much difficulty.

In order to explore this possibility in some detail, we included both the 11-item state loneliness scale mentioned earlier (which referred to social relations and loneliness within the 'past few days') and a parallel 11-item trait loneliness scale which made reference to 'the past few years'. We hypothesized that people with poor social skills would be prone to chronic (i.e., trait) loneliness and would also tend to make internal attributions for social dissatisfaction and loneliness.

Moreover, this kind of person — relatively unskilled, trait-lonely, and self-deprecating — might be reluctant to cope actively in the face of social rejection and isolation. Rubenstein & Shaver (1982a; 1982b) established that active coping (making social contact, calling a friend, joining new groups) was characteristic of people for whom loneliness was not a serious problem, but that more chronically lonely people tended to fall back on passive coping strategies (watching television, over-eating, taking tranquilizers, over-sleeping). In the present study, we decided to include measures of trait loneliness, attributions for social success and failure, and coping strategies, along with the measures of social skill described in the previous section.

A typical item on the attribution measure, based on Weiner's (1980) well-known work, reads as follows:

Suppose your casual friendships have been going well — you've been meeting and having enjoyable times with casual friends. What are the reasons?

- a. I'm the type of person who finds it easy to have casual friendships.
- b. I've been making an effort lately.
- c. It's easy around here to have casual friends.
- d. I've been lucky lately.

The alternatives — one for each of Weiner's four categories: ability, effort, task difficulty and luck — were rated on a 5-point scale: 'This definitely is . . .' to 'This definitely is *not* one of the reasons.' Equal numbers of success and failure situations were described; so eight scales resulted, one for each of the four kinds of attributions for success and for failure.

The coping items were all based on a single introductory question: 'When you feel dissatisfied with your social life (e.g., feeling lonely or left out, not having enough friends, not having a steady boyfriend/girlfriend, not feeling close to anyone), how do you respond?' Twenty-six possibilities were rated on a 5-point scale from 'never' to 'often' including: 'Ease the pain by drinking or taking drugs,' 'Try to make yourself more interesting or attractive,' 'Eat,' 'Put more time into work or schoolwork,' 'Do nothing, sleep,' 'Try to look on the bright side . . .,' 'Work at improving relationships with the people you know,' 'Go places where you will meet people.' Based on factor analyses of the results, four reliable scales were devised: social contact, sad passivity, constructive use of solitude and positive thinking.

**TABLE 4**  
Correlations among trait loneliness, social skills, and selected coping and attribution variables in the summer

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Trait Loneliness	(89)	-46	-48	-31	-26	43	-44	49
<i>Social skills</i>								
2. Initiation		(84)	56	53	39	-31	65	-51
3. Self-disclosure			(72)	43	26	-25	47	-43
4. Negative assertion				(64)	29	-25	37	-28
<i>Coping strategies</i>								
5. Social contact					(72)	-24	31	-20
6. Sad passivity						(74)	-27	22
<i>Attributions</i>								
7. Social success to ability							(69)	-58
8. Social failure to lack of ability								(66)

*Note*

All coefficients are statistically significant beyond the 0.05 probability level (most beyond the 0.001 level), and all have been multiplied by 100 to remove decimal points. Parenthesized figures along the diagonal are reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha). N = 166.

Table 4 presents a brief summary of correlational results from the summer. Findings from the other periods were similar, but the summer data seem most relevant to the idea that social skill and trait loneliness characterized some of our subjects even before they came to college. For simplicity's sake, only two of the four coping factors are included in the table, social contact and sad passivity, and only two of the attribution scales — the two concerned with ability. (The missing correlations were conceptually consistent with the ones shown; for example, subjects who attributed social success to ability tended not to attribute it to luck.)

The results are easy to summarize: all the correlations were statistically significant and in the expected directions. Most were large, considering the brevity of the scales involved. The socially skilled subjects tended not to be trait lonely and not to make self-deprecating attributions; they preferred active coping strategies (the ones Rubenstein & Shaver [1982a] had found to be most effective in warding off loneliness). Although, as always, the correlations by themselves cannot be interpreted causally, they are compatible with

an intuitively reasonable causal hypothesis: people who lack social skills (or at least think they lack them) attribute social failure to lack of skill (low ability, in Weiner's terms). Moreover, because people with little reported social skill anticipate failure, they do not choose to take the social initiative; instead, they settle (unhappily) for watching television, taking drugs, or overeating, the strategy we (following Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982a; 1982b) call 'sad passivity'. Because inadequate skills and lack of initiative lead to real relationship deficits, the kind of person we are describing tends to be chronically (that is 'trait') lonely. Obviously, more research will be needed to test this complex hypothesis, but it already has two considerable assets: logical coherence and compatibility with existing data.

### Continuity and change during the transition

If our general line of argument is correct, individual difference variables such as social skills and trait loneliness should remain relatively stable over time, while state variables, such as network satisfaction and state loneliness, fluctuate with life conditions. Panels A and B of Figure 2 present some of the relevant correlations. Although we are currently exploring more complex multivariate models, the simple zero-order correlations convey some of the most important structural features of the data.

Panel A shows how a composite index of social skills (the unweighted average of the specific skill scores) and trait loneliness relate to themselves and to network quality over time. Notice that social skills and trait loneliness did, as expected, display considerable continuity over the year (average period-to-period  $r$ 's were 0.71 for social skills and 0.79 for trait loneliness). For every pair of time periods, the trait-to-trait autocorrelations exceeded the corresponding autocorrelation for network quality. Notice also that the lowest cross-time network-quality correlation appeared between summer and autumn, the now-familiar height of the transition process. Although we know from Table 4 that social skills and trait loneliness were significantly correlated with each other, they predicted network quality in systematically different ways. The social skills measure correlated most highly with network quality in the autumn, at the very time when trait loneliness and network quality displayed their weakest association.

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people cope with new demands during the initial phases of a transition can have lasting implications for adjustment.

When we step back from this pattern of findings, we see that network quality and state loneliness, both of which can be viewed as affective states, were determined by a combination of dispositions and environmentally induced network disruptions—in other words, by a personality–situation interaction. That interaction will be the focus of our final comments.

### **Conclusion: putting the person and the situation together**

During the past ten or fifteen years, a great deal has been written about the joint role of dispositional and situational factors in determining behaviour and adjustment. The results of the present study underscore the importance of this interactional approach, as can be shown by summarizing the findings under three headings: normative, situationally induced changes ('the transition'); general socio-emotional correlates of key individual difference variables; and person–situation interactions.

For most freshmen, the transition to college can be viewed as a dramatic change in situation: leaving home, moving into an apartment or dormitory without adult supervision, attending large lecture classes, and being faced with the task of building new social ties. Our results suggest that this amounts to a major social and psychological upheaval. Half of all romances, initiated either before or during the freshman year, broke up, for example—most within a few weeks or months. Relationships with pre-college friends became less satisfying, and new 'closest' friends declined in importance as often as they became closer. Organizational memberships suffered a decline in quantity and quality that was never quite repaired even by the end of the year. The average student quickly located a new group of casual acquaintances, but felt less popular with this group than with pre-college acquaintances. Relationships with family members reportedly improved, but we were unable to say why. Whatever the reason, satisfaction with family relations had very little to do with overall network satisfaction during the academic year.

As peer network satisfaction fell in the autumn, state loneliness increased, and subjects reported that the transition from high school to college was more difficult than any they had experienced before. By spring, network satisfaction had increased, state loneliness had fallen, and the transition was no longer seen as particularly difficult.

In other words, there was a normative pattern of shifting emotional states across the first year of college.

Not everyone responded to the situation with equally intense feelings, however. Network dissatisfaction, state loneliness and transition difficulty were correlated with a cluster of dispositional variables—social skills, attributions, coping styles and trait loneliness—all of which were relatively stable across the period under study. We hypothesize that perceived social skill occupies the centre of this cluster, a hypothesis compatible with, but not proven by, the fact that all the dispositional variables, including skills, correlated significantly with each other. We reason that people who perceive themselves as skilled have the courage to use active coping strategies, such as introducing themselves to strangers, attending group meetings with strangers, calling someone for a date, and so on. Logically enough, when skilled people succeed socially they tend to attribute the success to internal factors; when they fail, they are unlikely to blame the failure on insufficient ability (or skill). Since skilled interactions and active coping strategies are often rewarding and successful, skilled subjects are unlikely candidates for chronic, or trait, loneliness.

Described in this way, it is evident that there should have been some 'main effects' of social skill in our data, and there were. People who described themselves as skilled, for example, tended to have more satisfying networks and to be less state lonely regardless of time period. But we also documented some notable person-by-situation interactions. Skills predicted network satisfaction best during the most disruptive phase of the transition. Trait loneliness predicted state loneliness best during periods of relative social stability. Men and women had very similar loneliness scores in the summer before entering college, but men's loneliness level jumped four times higher than women's during the autumn quarter. For each of these interaction effects, the explanation seems to lie in the needs and skills that different people bring to their social relationships under particular circumstances. Trait-lonely people seem to want or need something that, even when well-established, their personal relationships fail to provide; men lack what might be called an intimacy-orientation and intimacy skills; some members of both sexes lack confidence and ability in the areas of relationship initiation, self-disclosure and assertiveness. In other words, although the term 'trait' tends to sound static, the traits we have identified can only be explained in dynamic or process terms.

On the basis of our findings, we suspect that most of Cutrona's

(1982) chronically lonely UCLA freshmen were lonely and self-critical even before they came to college. Moreover, it seems unlikely that their problems were *primarily* attributional in nature, unless one views attributions as logical outgrowths of self-evaluations which are rooted in experiences implying insufficient social skill. We cannot say for certain whether trait-lonely subjects' negative skill self-assessments are accurate, but findings from previous studies (e.g., those reviewed by Jones, 1982) suggest that in at least some cases they are. In those cases, remediation efforts that focus solely on attributions while neglecting skills will probably be unsuccessful in the long run.

### Practical implications

For most students entering college, it would be wise to expect a somewhat distressing, although temporary, loss of social support, one that cannot be much eased by contacts with old network members. The solution lies in the creation of new, satisfying network ties, a process that seems to take most students several months to complete. During the transition period, therefore, it is important for students to realize that they are not unique in their concerns and frustrations, and that instability in their relationships should not be regarded as cause for internal, self-deprecating attributions. Almost anything universities can do to foster rewarding interpersonal contact during the first year — especially during the first quarter or semester — would be valuable, we believe, since the average student probably suffers more from lack of opportunities than from lack of interest or skills.

One should anticipate, however, that every incoming class will contain a substantial minority of students who, if they remain unaided, are destined to feel lonely all year. Many of them will be people who were lonely before they came to college and who have been disappointed and dissatisfied with their relationships for quite some time. For them, counselling centres might offer social skills workshops, attribution retraining sessions and so on (see Rook & Peplau [1982], and Young [1982], for ideas). Far from 'blaming the victim', such a person-oriented approach is a humane response to people whose needs are unlikely to be satisfied by situational remedies. When the causes of interpersonal problems really are 'internal', it makes sense to recognize that fact and undertake person-oriented change efforts.

### Research implications

Just as Cutrona's study left many questions unanswered — questions that prompted us to undertake the present research — we, in the process of answering some of these, raised several more.

One question has to do with the quality of high-school friendships and love relationships. We probed only lightly into the realm of reasons for broken-off relationships, but the results were intriguing. Our subjects seem to have been involved in relationships, both during high school and after they entered college, that they did not understand very well, and the course of which they could not have predicted. (Of course, it is possible that adults cannot make such predictions very accurately either, as indicated by the high divorce rate — an interesting and researchable issue in its own right.) It would be useful to know more about these relationships, and about the evidently unexpected life events that resulted in their weakening and destruction.

Another researchable mystery concerns the reported improvements in relations with family members. Since Pipp et al. (1983, unpub.) obtained similar results using rather different methods, we are confident that the reported improvement in college students' relations with family members is replicable. But what does it mean? Do interactions with family members actually improve, or is imagined improvement part of the process of coping alone with a new and difficult situation (something akin to the self-assurances of a two-year old: 'Mommy'll come back', 'Daddy won't let them hurt me')? Whatever the precise nature of the reported improvement, it has relatively little effect on loneliness and transition difficulty. Does this imply that it is a weak coping strategy, or does its function lie elsewhere, in the process of separation and individuation from parents?

One of our more surprising results was that satisfaction with family relations had almost nothing to do with adjustment to college. Apparently, the force of the transition to college was so pre-occupying that previously established relationships simply ceased to matter for a while. Perhaps this is a real-world example of the 'perceptual salience' effects documented in a host of laboratory experiments by Taylor & Fiske (1978). In those experiments, whatever captured subjects' attention had a disproportionately large impact on cognitions and feelings. If the same concept is applicable to stressful experiences, it would seem that situations can be so compelling and demanding that other, potentially mood-enhancing

pieces of information cannot make their way into a person's temporarily crowded phenomenology.

Why was this particular transition harder for men than for women? Previous research suggests that men are not very good at building and sustaining close relationships (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982b; Wheeler et al., 1983). In the current study, they obtained lower social skills scores than women and reported being less close to their pre-college and freshman-year friends. As if the modal differences between the sexes were not sufficiently troublesome, however, culture has conspired to make the freshman male's dating life a very frustrating business. His most desirable dating partners — attractive first-year women — are likely to be lured away by upperclassmen, yet he himself feels uncomfortable seeking older partners.

Our findings clearly argue for drawing a distinction between state and trait loneliness. When researchers use loneliness scales without a time referent, they are bound to identify some people who are lonely because of life circumstances and others whose loneliness is a stable feature of their lives. Researchers have tended to shy away from considering loneliness a trait because they do not want to encourage self-blame or 'blaming the victim' when situational or cultural factors are actually at fault. Although this is a commendable attitude, it has the undesirable effect of blurring the trait-state distinction in studies showing that 'lonely' people are overly self-conscious, awkward at self-disclosure, inadequate as interpersonal problem-solvers, and so on. We suspect that these kinds of findings, which attach a severe stigma to all lonely people, are in fact due almost exclusively to the proportion of the subject population that is trait lonely.

An additional consequence of ignoring the state-trait distinction is that researchers may inadvertently cause their findings to seem less replicable than they actually are. Our study implies that an indiscriminate selection of 'lonely' college freshmen during the autumn quarter would net a large proportion who are state lonely but not trait lonely. A similar selection in the spring, just a few months later, would yield a much higher proportion of trait-lonely subjects, because the non-trait-lonely freshmen (the majority) would no longer register as 'lonely' on a general scale. To the extent that experimental results depend on the presence of trait-lonely subjects, a particular experiment could succeed at one time and fail at another. This reveals an infrequently discussed effect of person-situation interactions in social psychology; we usually think of individual differences in terms of fairly stable and in some sense 'internal' traits,

but it is also possible for individuals to differ because of transitory events and stresses they are experiencing outside the laboratory.

What exactly is trait loneliness? This is another question that we are forced to leave unanswered. We have used the term in a purely descriptive fashion; it refers to the fact that a person has been state lonely for a long time — long enough to indicate that the causes are probably dispositional rather than situational. In the present study, as in others; loneliness seems to be due more to qualitative than to quantitative features of relationships and networks. In particular, trait-lonely people seem to want something from relationships that they cannot obtain, even when the number and length of their relationships are about the same as everyone else's. Further research will be necessary to discover what, if anything, besides lack of 'intimacy skills' lies behind these unsatisfied needs.

Finally, our study, along with Cutrona's, reveals the advantages of longitudinal research on social networks and loneliness. As social scientists continue to explore concepts such as stress, social support and social development, they will, we hope, create a portrait of human beings as actively involved and continually developing members of complex social networks which are developing and changing in their own right, occasionally at a very rapid pace. The field needs a broad social and developmental perspective which can coherently encompass the burgeoning, and not yet well-integrated, literature on personal relationships. In working toward that perspective, we think the concepts of 'normative transition' and 'person-situation interaction' will prove useful.

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