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## | 7 |

# Family Characteristics and Loneliness among Older Parents

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Loneliness among older people is an intriguing issue in aging research, policy, and practice. Many disciplinary perspectives and approaches have been used in an attempt to understand and explain well-being and loneliness among older adults. Dykstra (1990), with reference to House and Kahn (1985), found three approaches in the study of the association between types of relationships and well-being with loneliness as a component of an overall measure of well-being: (a) the social integration approach, (b) the social network approach, and (c) the social support approach. In the social integration approach the focus is on the existence of relationships such as marital relationship, availability of family members or friends, and memberships in church or volunteer associations. Researchers in the social network tradition examine the structure of the relationships in which individuals are embedded. Their hypothesis is that the structure and composition of the network have an impact on the pattern of interactions and flow of resources within the network with consequences on well-being. Within the social support approach, researchers focus on what is provided to an individual by others (i.e., emotional or instrumental support) and how this is appreciated. Each of these traditional approaches has been productive in understanding well-being and loneliness among older people (Dykstra, 1990; de Jong Gierveld and Tilburg, 1995).

In this study we intend to expand this tradition and add a somewhat different approach to explain loneliness—a family system approach. A starting point in this approach is the notion that the family as a whole has its own impact on the behavior and subsequently on the well-being of its individual members. The family is viewed as a cultural entity that establishes

a common ground for interaction and exchange, and defines a family style of dealing with ongoing family issues. The focus may be on the functioning of the total set of family relationships including their interrelatedness and not on separate dyadic relationships. These notions are based on fundamental social-psychological and sociological arguments that social system characteristics impact human behavior. Our question is, therefore, whether we can show the specific impact of the type of family characteristics as a collectivity on the well-being of older parents.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF A FAMILY AS A WHOLE

The literature discusses several approaches that view the family as a cultural entity. Handel (1967) discussed "family themes" as typical family-bounded patterns of feelings, motives, fantasies, and conventionalized understandings that organize a family's view of reality. Ford and Herrick (1974) took a somewhat different perspective and talked about "family rules"—binding directives concerning the ways in which family members should relate to one another and to the outside world. Family rules provide a family with character and style. In 1981, Reiss introduced the notion of "family construct," suggesting that a family creates its own paradigm—a set of shared assumptions that make sense of the world and coordinate the actions of the family members. Bennett et al. (1988) tried to cover each of these notions under the umbrella concept of "family identity"—a group psychology phenomenon that has its foundation in a shared system of beliefs, including implicit assumptions about roles, relationships, and values that govern interaction in families. According to the authors, a fundamental component of family identity is the beliefs about family membership—who is in and who is out of the family—both now and in the past. Recently, Widmer et al. (1999) and Widmer (1999) reconsidered the component of family membership. While earlier discussions assumed, explicitly or implicitly, that a family includes those who share a household or a limited set of family roles, Widmer et al. (1999) prefer to talk about family contexts—a rather large and unbounded set of kin. They argue that recent findings about strong emotional bonds between adults and their siblings and parents, about divorce and the extension of remarriage, and about pseudokinship ties show the existence of complex family groupings, referred to as family contexts, a type of cognitive network. This is important to our approach in this study, because we also suggest considering older parents and their adult children as a cultural entity with a specific type of interrelatedness, despite the fact that they mostly live in separate households. We suggest that this interrelatedness originates about thirty years prior to the study time from two kinship systems. It is based in early

educational and developmental experiences, is still dealing with a number of common orientations, beliefs, and perceptions, and demonstrates a number of commonalities in the style of behavior. We suggest calling this typical cultural family characteristic the family ambience of older parents and their adult children. Family ambience ranges from a positive coherent family ambience to a diverse incoherent family ambience.

Another perspective on the family as a whole took a more functional orientation. Several family sociologists (Alexander, Johnson, and Carter, 1984; Epstein, Bishop, and Levin, 1978; Moos and Moos, 1981; and Olson et al., 1982; Olson, Russell, and Sprenkle, 1983; and Olson, Sprenkle, and Russell, 1979; Sprenkle and Olson, 1978) introduced, during the second half of the twentieth century, measurement instruments, procedures, and tools to typify families as a functioning social system. This approach was developed in order to relate the quality of family functioning to the outcome of educational processes and/or relational experiences. Scholars tried to identify family characteristics that distinguish between problem and non-problem families, i.e., families with and without schizophrenics, neurotics, runaway adolescents, and/or sex offenders. Similarly, quality of relational functioning between marital partners has been related to outcomes such as divorce, level of communication, and affection. Touliatos, Perlmutter, and Straus (1990) published an early overview and Tutty (1995) presented a comparative analysis of the methodological quality of six measures of family functioning.

Olson, Sprenkle, and Russell (1979) considered two dimensions of family functioning as crucial: cohesion and adaptability. They considered extreme scores on both adaptability and cohesion as dysfunctional for educational outcomes. They introduced the self-report measure, the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES), from which a Clinical Rating Scale version was later developed (Olson and Killorin, 1985). Moos and Moos (1981) included nine dimensions of family functioning; among them were cohesion, expressivity, norms and values, and organization and control. Again, these dimensions of family functioning were expected to be related to outcomes of family and relational functioning (Moos, 1990; Holahan and Moos, 1987; Billings, Cronkite, and Moos, 1983). The McMaster Model of Family Functioning, developed by Epstein, Bishop, and Levine (1978) and originally designed as a clinical rating scale, consists of six dimensions: problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavior control. Later a sixty-item self-report instrument was developed to assess the six identified dimensions of family functioning (Epstein, Baldwin, and Bishop, 1983).

In this chapter, we intend to take a comparable functional approach of the family system in order to examine whether we can expand our

understanding of loneliness among older parents. However there are a few important differences. The families we study do not live as nuclear families anymore. Most children have had their own nuclear families for quite a long time and live geographically apart from their parents. Moreover, we are not interested in the outcome of educational processes among children, but rather in experienced loneliness among the older parents. Based on a qualitative study, Pyke and Bengtson (1996) introduced a distinction between individualist and collectivist systems of family elder care. To qualify the distinction between the two family systems the authors "identified three sets of traits, among which there was a high level of congruency: family ethics, the level of contact and interdependence that family members expect and receive from one another, and responses to the caregiving needs of aging family members" (Pyke, 1999, p. 662). Interestingly, these traits present a clear combination of the cultural and functional dimensions of family systems. Both Pyke and Bengtson (1996) and Pyke (1999) demonstrate that factors at the family level appear to be important in understanding outcomes at the individual level: aging parents.

The data of a substudy of the NESTOR "Living Arrangements and Social Networks of Older Adults" program enables us to construct characteristics of the family and to examine to what extent these characteristics are related to older parent's experience of loneliness. In this case we consider older parents and their adult children—living at home or independently—as a family. We intend to determine to what extent both family ambience and family functioning are interrelated and whether they are related to the level of loneliness of older parents, controlling for individual and relational determinants.

## METHOD

### Sample

In 1992–1993, 277 older adults, referred to as the focal parents, participated in a study on characteristics of personal networks. These focal parents, 144 men and 133 women, were between 55 and 89 years old (average 68.1;  $SD = 8.3$ ); 194 lived with a partner (191 were married, 1 divorced, and 2 widowed) and the others had no partner (1 married and separated, 10 divorced, and 72 widowed). Other participants in the study were focal parents' partners and a selection of the children. The focal parents were a selection from all respondents ( $n = 580$ ) in the study. Excluded were childless respondents and respondents with step-, foster, or adoptive children ( $n = 144$ ), and respondents with a partner outside the household ( $n = 4$ ). Furthermore, data on family ambience had to be available from the focal parent (35 respondents were excluded), from the partner, if there was a

partner (exclusion of 40 respondents), and from at least one child (exclusion of 63 respondents). Next, 17 focal parents were excluded due to missing data on loneliness.

The focal parents in the study comprised a probability sample from another sample. The initial sample consisted of 4,494 respondents with whom face-to-face interviews were conducted in 1992 (de Jong Gierveld, van Tilburg, and Dykstra, 1995). The initial sample was stratified, with equal numbers of men and women born from 1903 to 1937, and was randomly taken from the registers of eleven municipalities in the Netherlands. The response rate was 62 percent.

In the beginning of the initial interview, all the children of the parents were identified. The focal parents (and their partners) had 1 to 11 children (on average 3.0; in total 835). Questionnaires were mailed to the parents and the children who were identified as network members and were among the eight network members with whom the contact was most frequent. The procedure has been described in detail elsewhere (Klein Ikkink, van Tilburg, and Knipscheer, 1999). Data on family ambience was available from 1 to 6 children (on average 1.8; in total 488).

## Measurements

Family ambience was measured by a number of statements describing how family members used to deal with each other as a "team" of family members. Each family member was invited to react to a number of statements about his/her family's ambience from his/her own perspective. Following Moos and Moos (1986) and Jansma (1988), who translated earlier Moos's Family Climate Scale in Dutch, we selected a set of fourteen (see Appendix) items referring to reciprocal concern and commitment, getting along, affective responsiveness, and openness of communication. Answering categories were *no!*, *no*, *more or less*, *yes*, and *yes!* with corresponding values of 1 to 5 assigned. The scale had a range of 14 to 70 and was homogeneous (Loevinger's coefficient of hierarchical homogeneity  $H = 0.44$ ) and reliable ( $\rho = 0.90$ ).

To measure loneliness, five positive and six negative items were used (de Jong Gierveld and Kamphuis, 1985). The positive items assessed feelings of belonging, for example, "I can rely on my friends whenever I need them." The negative items applied to aspects of missing relationships, for example, "I experience a sense of emptiness around me." Answering categories were *no!*, *no*, *more or less*, *yes*, and *yes!* Answers on positive items were reversed. To improve scale homogeneity, the answers were dichotomized, assigning the median category to the value indicating loneliness. The scale had a range of 0 (not lonely) to 11 (extremely lonely). The scale had been used in several Dutch surveys and proved to be a robust,

reliable, and valid instrument (van Tilburg and de Leeuw, 1991). The homogeneity ( $H = 0.45$ ) and reliability ( $\rho = 0.87$ ) of the scale were sufficient.

A scale for the capacity to perform activities in daily life (ADL) was constructed as a sum score of four items: walking up and down stairs, walking for five minutes outdoors without resting, getting up from and sitting down in a chair, and getting dressed and undressed. The response options were "not at all," "only with help," "with a great deal of difficulty," "with some difficulty," and "without difficulty," with corresponding values of 1 to 5 assigned. The scale was homogeneous ( $H = 0.64$ ) and reliable ( $\rho = 0.87$ ). The range was 4 to 20; a higher score indicated a better capacity.

With respect to relationship characteristics, the questionnaires were completely personalized. The names of the children and other network members were included on the list for the parents, and the names of the parent(s) and the other children were on the list for the children. Three questions were posed about instrumental support received: "How often in the past year did the following people help you with daily chores in and around the house, such as preparing meals, cleaning the house, transportation, small repairs, or filling in forms?" ". . . gave you advice (e.g., on an important decision or on filling out forms)?" and ". . . gave you help when you needed it, e.g., when you were ill?" For emotional support received, three questions were posed: "How often during the past year did it occur that the following persons gave you a present?" ". . . showed you they cared for you?" and "How often during the past year did it occur that you told the following persons about your personal feelings?" Six similar questions were asked about support given. The response options were *never*, *seldom*, *sometimes*, and *often*, and these responses were scored on a scale from 1 to 4. For each relationship, four sum scores of instrumental and emotional support received and given were computed. The scores of the four scales range from 3 to 12. The four scales are homogeneous ( $H \geq 0.55$ ) and reliable  $\rho$  (0.76).

## Procedure

First, focal parent's view on family ambience and loneliness was compared with partner's and children's scores. For 149 focal parents, data from more than one child was available. The children's scores were averaged, and the variation across children was computed by taking the standard deviation. Second, focal parent's loneliness was regressed on family ambience, controlled for sex, age, focal parent's and partner's ADL capacity, and the number of children. For family ambience, six variables were selected: focal parent's and partner's view, the average and standard deviation across the children, and in order to evaluate whether incongruencies

between family members were of importance, the difference between focal parent's and partner's view and between focal parent's and children's view. The control variables were entered into the equation, while the significance of the six variables on family ambience was evaluated by a forward stepwise procedure ( $p < 0.10$ ) in order to avoid multicollinearity problems. The analysis was conducted for focal parents with and without a partner separately. Third, variables on the exchange of support within the family (three on instrumental and three on emotional support) were introduced and extended the equation. Two types of variables were on the instrumental and emotional support received from the partner and the average support received from the children. The reports by the focal parent (support received) and by the others (support given) were both taken into account by taking their average. Data on support received from the partner was missing for two respondents who were excluded from the analysis. For six focal parents, the partner's report on support provided to the focal parent was missing. For the others, the scores of both reports were averaged. Of the 835 relationships between the focal parents and their children, reports were missing for 295 relationships; for 464 relationships both reports from the parent and the child was available, for 70 only parent's report was available, and for 6 only child's report was available. Since we were interested in family support and wanted to take into account supportive exchanges between children, the third type consisted of the average intensity of support across all relationships between children, not taking into account the direction of the support provided. Consequently, only respondents with more than one child ( $n = 239$ ) were included. However, due to the selection, children data on relationships between children were missing for 61 respondents, leaving 47 focal parents without a partner and 131 with a partner. The sex, age, marital status, and average loneliness and family ambience of those 61 focal parents did not differ significantly from the 178 respondents included in the analysis. Since there were strong correlations between instrumental and emotional supportive exchanges, a forward stepwise procedure was adopted, with  $p < .10$  due to the small number of respondents. Knowing that loneliness is strongly related to partner status we executed all the analyses for focal parents with and without partner separately.

## RESULTS

Our explorative analysis focused on the explanation of the focal parent's loneliness. First we present descriptive findings. Respondents with a partner and without a partner differed significantly in loneliness ( $M\ 2.1$  versus  $3.9$ ;  $SD\ 2.6$  versus  $3.4$ ;  $t = 4.3$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and perceived family ambience

Table 7.1 Differences in Intensity of Supportive Exchanges

	No partner (n = 47)		With partner (n = 131)		t
	M	SD	M	SD	
Instrumental Support					
Support received from partner		9.7	2.0		
Support received from children	7.4	1.7	6.4	1.7	2.6**
Intensity within relationships between children	4.4	1.5	5.1	1.7	2.4*
Emotional Support					
Support received from partner		10.4	1.2		
Support received from children	9.7	1.0	9.1	1.2	2.9**
Intensity within relationships between children	7.2	1.7	7.7	1.8	1.7+

+,  $p < 0.10$ ; \*,  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*,  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*,  $p < 0.001$ .

Note: Focal parents with two or more children only.

(M 53.9 versus 50.8; SD 6.6 versus 7.5;  $t = 3.5$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Among respondents with a partner there were no significant differences between focal parents and their partners in loneliness (M 2.1 versus 2.5;  $t = 1.9$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) as well as in perceived family ambience (M 53.9 versus 54.0;  $t = 0.1$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). Parents' loneliness correlated 0.45 and their family ambience correlated 0.55. Loneliness did not differ between the children and the focal parent (M 2.5 versus 2.6;  $t = 0.6$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ;  $r = 0.22$ ). However, the average perceived family ambience among adult children was lower than perceived ambience among their parent being focal respondent (M 47.6 versus 53.0;  $t = 10.8$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $r = 0.27$ ).

Six support measures have been constructed, three for instrumental support and a parallel three for emotional support. In general, focal parents report to get emotional support more often than instrumental support (Table 7.1). The intensity of received partner support—for those with a partner—as perceived by the focal parent and as given by the partner is higher (more frequently given) than children support. Interestingly, on average, support from children to focal parents without a partner, including the “received” perspective of the focal parent and the averaged “given” perspective of the children, is significantly higher than for those with a partner, for both instrumental and emotional support. It seems that both focal parents without a partner (being in majority widowed or divorced) and their children reciprocally acknowledge the children's investment in parental support. However, looking at the third measure of support, taking the average intensity of giving and receiving support among children only, it appears that the level of exchange of instrumental as well as emotional support is somewhat higher among children of focal parents with a partner.



Table 7.2 Correlations of Intensity of Supportive Exchanges and Focal Parent's Perspective on Family Ambience

	No partner (n = 47)	With partner (n = 131)
Instrumental Support		
Support received from partner		0.16+
Support received from children	0.18	0.17*
Intensity within relationships between children	0.13	0.17*
Emotional Support		
Support received from partner		0.31***
Support received from children	0.06	0.28***
Intensity within relationships between children	0.19	0.26**

+,  $p < 0.10$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Note: Focal parents with two or more children only.

Correlations of the support measures and the focal parent's perspective on family ambience are presented in Table 7.2. A remarkable finding is that among focal parents with a partner emotional support is more strongly related to the perspective on family ambience than instrumental support. Furthermore, correlations with emotional support are higher among focal parents with a partner than among those without a partner. This is interesting because the level of emotional support from children among focal parents without a partner is the highest support level of children as was shown in Table 7.1. It seems that a high level of emotional support of children among parents without a partner does not always allow for the perception of a homogeneous and balanced family ambience.

Model 1 in Table 7.3 presents the results of the regression of focal parent's loneliness on six measures of perceived family ambience, controlling for well-known determinants as sex, age, ADL capacity, and number of children. Family ambience as perceived by the focal parent was by far the best predictor of his or her experience of loneliness, although it did not enter the equation among focal parents without a partner. Partner's perceived family ambience is considerably related to loneliness of the focal parent, but did not contribute to the regression. Neither children's perceived family ambience nor the variability among the children was related to the focal parent's loneliness. Focal parent's loneliness was lower when there was more variability of focal parent's, partner's, and children's perspectives on family ambience, as indicated by the difference scores. However, these variables did not contribute to the regression.

The regression equations were extended with the support data (Model 2 in Table 7.4). Unfortunately, due to missing data on support, the number of families represented in the analysis has been considerably reduced. In

Table 7.3 Regression of Focal Parent's Loneliness: Model 1

	No partner (n = 83)		With partner (n = 194)	
	r	$\beta$	r	$\beta$
Sex	-0.03	-0.04	-0.10	-0.08
Age	-0.01	-0.03	0.09	0.06
ADL capacity				
Focal parent	-0.17	-0.17	0.02	-0.03
Partner	†		-0.04	-0.05
Number of children	-0.01	-0.02	-0.04	-0.08
Family ambience as perceived by <sup>a</sup>				
Focal parent	-0.24*		-0.36***	-0.37***
Partner	†	-0.23***		
Children (average score)	-0.01		-0.09	
Variability in family ambience a				
Among children (SD)	-0.00		-0.05	
Difference between focal parent and partner†			-0.21**	
Difference between focal parent and children	-0.20		-0.15*	
R <sup>2</sup>		0.03		0.15**

+,  $p < 0.10$ ; \*,  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*,  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*,  $p < 0.001$ .

†, Not included in the equation.

<sup>a</sup>Forward stepwise procedure.

these analyses 18 and 19 percent of the variation in loneliness among the focal parents has been explained, however with a surprising similarity and a typical difference between the two types of parents. In both equations the focal parents perspective on family ambience contributes in explaining loneliness, be it among parents with a partner more significantly. Among focal parents without a partner ADL capacity of the focal parent has a considerable contribution in explaining loneliness. Among focal parents with a partner, in contrast, emotional support received from children contributes significantly in explaining loneliness, even when taken into account the contribution of the focal parents perspective on family ambience. High intensity in received emotional support from children (according to parent and children) seems to prevent older people's loneliness.

## DISCUSSION

In this chapter, we explored the contribution of family characteristics in explaining loneliness among older parents. We developed a family system approach by constructing two types of family characteristics: family ambi-

Table 7.4 Regression of Focal Parent's Loneliness: Model 2

	<i>No partner</i> (n = 47)		<i>With partner</i> (n = 131)	
	r	$\beta$	r	$\beta$
Sex	0.12	0.02	-0.05	0.02
Age	-0.01	-0.04	0.12	0.12
ADL capacity				
Focal parent	-0.31*	-0.24	-0.00	-0.08
Partner	†		-0.05	-0.02
Number of children	0.07	-0.00	-0.01	-0.08
Family ambience as perceived by a				
Focal parent	-0.37**	-0.31+	-0.35***	-0.31***
Partner	†		-0.20*	
Children (average score)	-0.31*		-0.23**	
Variability in family ambience a				
Among children (SD)	0.00		-0.06	
Difference between focal parent and partner	†		-0.16+	
Difference between focal parent and children	-0.12		-0.09	
Instrumental support a				
Support received from partner	†		-0.06	
Support Received from Children	-0.03		-0.21*	
Intensity within relationships between children	0.11		-0.22*	
Emotional support a				
Support received from partner	†		-0.10	
Support received from children	0.08		-0.28**	-0.21*
Intensity within relationships between children	-0.03		-0.24**	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.19		0.18**	

+,  $p < 0.10$ ; \*,  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*,  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*,  $p < 0.001$ .

†, Not included.

<sup>a</sup>Forward stepwise procedure.

Note: Focal parents with two or more children only.

ence and family functioning. Family ambience refers to the family as a cultural identity with a specific type of interrelatedness that is based on a number of shared orientations, beliefs and perceptions with a behavioral impact on family interaction patterns. A set of fourteen statements, describing how family members are used to dealing with each other, has been utilized to measure family ambience. All these statements had their focus on the family as a whole. Family functioning refers to the way the family functions as a social system in adaptability to new situations, in organization of activities or in exchange of support. In this study we construed "group-measures" of exchange of support between individual family members as an indices of family functioning.

Because parents with a partner were very significantly less lonely than those without a partner, analyses were conducted for the two groups separately. Parents with a partner were more positive in their perspective on family ambience than parents without a partner, while there was no difference between these parents and their partners. In general children were lower on family ambience. Such a difference in perspective between parents and children appears not to be unusual. Parents often register fewer conflicts and disagreements in their family relationships, easily neglect violations of family rules, and prefer to stress a common commitment to the family style of life (Knipscheer and Bevers, 1985; Luescher and Pillemer, 1998).

Children of focal parents without partner focused their instrumental and emotional support on their parent, this support being more intensive than among focal parents with a partner. It appears that children and divorced or widowed parents in old age agree on their acknowledgement of the support needed by and given to the parent. Given this focus on the parental support in the case of focal parent without a partner, exchange of support—both given and received—among children themselves appears to be considerably lower. In this case, family functioning in the area of support has a clear focus on focal parent without a partner.

The exchange of support between family members is related to the focal parent's perspective on family ambience, with a considerably higher correlation among parents with a partner. The parents' positive view on their family's ambience is related to a higher level of exchange of support among family members. Family functioning in the area of support and perceived family ambience seem to have a reciprocal relationship. This particularly pertains to the exchange of emotional support among families of focal parents with a partner.

Focal parents with a partner, who have a positive view on their family's ambience, are much less lonely than others (both focal parents with a partner, who have a less positive view on their family's ambience and focal parents without a partner). While the partner's family ambience score and several family ambience indices are significantly related to the focal parents loneliness, they do not contribute in the regression on loneliness. This means that none of the family indices on family ambience, the average of the children, the variability among the children's score, the difference between focal parent and partner, nor the difference between focal parent and children contribute systematically to the explanation of the focal parent's loneliness. From this analysis it is clear that it is the individual focal parent's perspective on the ambience of the family collective that appears to be the best predictor of the focal parents experience of loneliness, especially when this parent still has a partner. In other words, there appears to be a connection between a parent's perception of his or her family ambience and his or her experience of loneliness.

Adding the support data to the regression analyses increased the explanatory power of the regression analyses. Still the focal parent's perspective on his/her family's ambience appears to be the most crucial one, in this case irrespective of the focal parent having a partner or not. For the parents without a partner, ADL capacity turns out to be second important explanatory factor. For focal parents with a partner, however, the intensity of the emotional support received from children appears to be the second important factor, as was previously reported by Long and Martin (2000). This is the only factor of family functioning construed at a family system level, which contributes significantly in the explanation of the focal parent's loneliness. In reviewing the explanatory power of about 19 percent, we have to consider that the difference between parents without and with a partner was not taken into account since analyses were conducted separately for each group. Furthermore, it is remarkable that we were able to model differences in loneliness among parents with a partner, given the low variability in scores.

Finally, we have to comment on three specific aspects of the design of this study on the family system. First, when studying the family from the perspective of family members it is preferable to have data collected from all members (Mangen, 1995). Since we analyzed data collected within the framework of a network study, including partners, children, other kin and nonkin, the number of children included was relatively small. Furthermore, nonresponse from family members resulted in a smaller number of families for which data from different members was available. Second, methodological developments have resulted in improved techniques for the analysis of characteristics of individual family members and their relationships while taking into account contextual family characteristics by means of multilevel analysis (Snijders, 1995). However, tools to study the family as a whole while taking into account the variability in family perspectives of individual family members and characteristics of their relationships are still very limited (Tutty, 1995). Our approach to studying differences in the loneliness of a specific parent from aggregated characteristics and perspectives of children and their mutual relationships might neglect specific family dynamics. Third, we introduced two types of family characteristics—family ambience and family functioning—and construed for each of them a number of variables at the family level to see to what extent family variables would explain loneliness of a specific family member—the focal parent. The two family variables that turned out to contribute in explaining loneliness among the focal parents appear to be directly or more or less indirectly the focal parents' perspectives on family ambience and family functioning. In the second model only the focal parents' family ambience score of the six ambience measures contributed to the explanation of loneliness, while in family functioning only emotional support received from children contributed, this support measure being a

combination of the support as received according to the parent and given according to the children. None of the other "collective" measures contributed to the explanation of loneliness. As for family ambience, as measured in this study, this may suggest that there are as many perspectives on family ambience as there are family members. This idea is supported by Widmer's (1999) concept of individually cognitive contexts. As for family functioning, it suggests that the real experience of emotional support, as measured in the emotional support received from children, moderates the focal parents' loneliness. These limited findings may question our ambition to develop family characteristics that explain loneliness or our achievement in the construction of adequate family characteristics.

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### APPENDIX: ITEMS ON FAMILY AMBIENCE

1. We can get along very well.
2. In our family we are very open about our experiences.
3. We always have an easy understanding about what we are expected to do.
4. We can cooperate quite well.
5. Criticism about each other is always settled in our family.
6. We are strongly attached to each other.
7. We criticize each other if necessary.
8. We make considerable effort to see and talk to each other.
9. Sometimes we hug each other spontaneously.
10. If one of us is believed to misbehave, the family comments on this.
11. We are very reliable in meeting arrangements/commitments.
12. When we are together, the atmosphere is very relaxed.
13. If something has to be done, we will get things done.
14. We sympathize very much with each other.

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