

# Loneliness across cultures with different levels of social embeddedness: A qualitative study

Luzia C. Heu<sup>1</sup> | Nina Hansen<sup>1</sup> | Martijn van Zomeren<sup>1</sup> |  
Aharon Levy<sup>2</sup> | Tsvetina T. Ivanova<sup>1</sup> | Aiswarya Gangadhar<sup>1</sup> |  
Mahmoud Radwan

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences, Department for Social Psychology, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

<sup>2</sup>Columbia Business School, Faculty of Business, Columbia University in the City of New York, New York, New York, USA

## Correspondence

Luzia C. Heu, Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences, Department for Social Psychology, University of Groningen, Grote Kruisstraat 2/1, 9712 TS Groningen, The Netherlands.  
Email: luzia.heu@gmail.com

## Abstract

Valid theorizing and quantitative comparisons of loneliness across cultures require cross-culturally similar *meanings* of loneliness. However, we know little about whether this is the case: Influential conceptualizations of loneliness mostly come from North America or Europe, where individuals tend to have relatively few stable social relationships and social interactions (i.e., less *socially embedded* cultures). We thus compare selected conceptualizations of loneliness from the literature to loneliness experiences that are reported in 42 semi-structured interviews from countries with different levels of social embeddedness (Austria, Bulgaria, Israel, Egypt, India). Encouragingly, our thematic analysis does not suggest fundamental qualitative differences in loneliness definitions, perceived causes, or remedies. Nevertheless, we noticed and discuss aspects that may not be sufficiently considered in previous literature.

**Statement of Relevance:** We expand on previous research about loneliness (i.e., an important health risk) with a qualitative examination of loneliness experiences across cultures. For one, this serves to test the cross-cultural comparability of the meaning of loneliness, which is essential for valid cross-cultural theorizing and cross-cultural quantitative research. Furthermore, our rich qualitative data from different cultures reveals aspects of loneliness that have been less considered in previous research and can hence provide novel starting points for interventions.

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**KEYWORDS**

culture, in-depth interviews, interventions, loneliness, social embeddedness

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Loneliness is a major risk factor for impaired mental and physical health (e.g., cardiovascular diseases, obesity, depression, anxiety disorders; Cacioppo, Grippo, London, Goossens, & Cacioppo, 2015). To counteract severe loneliness and its aversive consequences, much psychological research has hence examined causes of and possible remedies for loneliness. However, since most psychological research is conducted in European or Northern American cultures (see also Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), we know comparatively little about loneliness in contexts with higher *social embeddedness* (i.e., cultures where individuals are more embedded in social networks, have more stable social relationships, and spend less time alone). This is striking because multiple studies indicate that loneliness is, on average, higher in more than in less socially embedded societies (e.g., Lykes & Kimmelmeier, 2014).

Indeed, different cultural norms about social relationships are likely to provide different breeding grounds for loneliness experiences: They do not only influence how embedded individuals are in social networks, but also in which relationships they receive essential social provisions (e.g., emotional support in friendships or partnerships), and which relationships or relationship qualities they perceive as important (e.g., love in partnerships; shared decision-making in family relationships). Such differences in how individuals relate to each other and what they expect from their relationships seem to imply *quantitative* differences in loneliness levels, causes, and experiences (e.g., Heu, van Zomeren, & Hansen, 2020; Lykes & Kimmelmeier, 2014; Rokach, Orzeck, Cripps, Lackovic-Grgin, & Penezic, 2001). However, little is known about qualitative differences in the meaning of the term loneliness and the experiences that it describes. As such, it is yet unclear whether loneliness is cross-culturally comparable at all, and whether existing research about loneliness from less socially embedded cultures can hence be useful to understand loneliness in more socially embedded cultures.

To answer this question, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews in five countries with different levels of social embeddedness (i.e., Austria, Bulgaria, Israel, Egypt, and India), where little research about loneliness has been done (in comparison to, e.g., the United States). More specifically, we examined whether a selection<sup>1</sup> of loneliness conceptualizations from the literature (see Table S1.1 in Appendix S1) could sufficiently describe the phenomenon of loneliness (i.e., definitions, perceived causes and remedies) across our cultural samples. This allowed to examine whether the meaning of loneliness and the experiences it describes are comparable across cultures and to identify aspects that have been considered less in this literature.

### 1.1 | Insights into loneliness from contexts of lower social embeddedness

#### 1.1.1 | Definitions of loneliness

Loneliness has been defined as perceived social isolation (VanderWeele, Hawkley, & Cacioppo, 2012), the feeling of being cut-off or separated from others (Hays & DiMatteo, 1987), or the aversive experience that results from a perceived discrepancy between actual and desired

relationships (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Loneliness definitions hence typically describe the *negative, subjective* experience of a relational impairment or shortcoming, which is different from the *objective* state of being alone.

Within such broad definitions, loneliness experiences can, however, be characterized as multifaceted (Rokach, 1988). In a large-scale qualitative study in Canada, four main aspects of loneliness experiences were identified: (a) Self-alienation (i.e., feelings of emptiness, unreality, no connection to oneself or the world around); (b) interpersonal isolation (missing an intimate relationship, missing a specific other, feeling different from others, socially rejected, or abandoned); (c) agony (negative emotional experiences); and (d) physiological or behavioral distressed reactions. As such, the emotions that accompany loneliness are highly similar to those that characterize depression (Cacioppo, Hawkley, & Thisted, 2010). The prevalence of each facet, however, varied by individual and situation, indicating that loneliness experiences are quite heterogeneous.

### 1.1.2 | Types of loneliness

Different loneliness *types* are distinguished by duration (e.g., chronic vs. situational loneliness; Beck & Young, 1978; De Jong Gierveld & Raadschelders, 1982) and cause (e.g., emotional vs. social vs. existential loneliness; Mijuskovic, 1977; Moustakas, 1972; Weiss, 1973). *Situational* loneliness is more transient than *chronic* loneliness, and often a reaction to specific events (e.g., relationship terminations, arguments; Beck & Young, 1978). Furthermore, *emotional* loneliness flows from a lack of a close, intimate relationship (e.g., a partnership or close friendship), whereas *social* loneliness flows from missing a social network or others to spend time with (e.g., friends or a community; Weiss, 1973). By contrast, *existential* loneliness (e.g., Mijuskovic, 1977; Moustakas, 1972) results from the realization that humans move from birth to death alone, without knowing whether their experiences are truly shared by others.

### 1.1.3 | Mechanisms underlying loneliness

From an evolutionary perspective, loneliness is an evolved response to a threat to reliable social relationships (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, & Boomsma, 2013). Specifically, loneliness motivates individuals to ensure that they are embedded in social relationships of high quality, because social isolation used to jeopardize survival throughout most of human history.

Similarly, loneliness has been suggested to emerge if an individual has in the past not been provided with (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014) or currently lacks certain social provisions (Weiss, 1974). Such social provisions include *attachment* (a relationship that provides a sense of security and belonging), *social integration* (a group that shares one's interests, that provides a shared interpretation of experience, companionship, and exchange of services), *reassurance of worth* (recognition of one's competences by others), *reliable alliance* (relationships that one can count on for assistance; e.g., family relationships), *guidance* (someone to provide advice), and *opportunity for nurturance* (opportunities to care for someone else, providing a sense of being needed; e.g., parent–child relationships).

A more cognitive perspective focuses on the subjective *perception* of a relational lack as mechanism underlying loneliness (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). It suggests that loneliness flows from an unfavorable *comparison between actual and desired social relationships*, and should hence be influenced by the various factors that impact on relationships or expectations about

them (see Table S1.1c in Appendix S1). This is in line with the somewhat broader perspective that loneliness results if individuals' relationships cannot meet their individual and culture-specific needs, expectations, or desires regarding relationships (Johnson & Mullins, 1987). As such, one person can feel lonely because of not having a romantic partner whereas another person in the same situation may not feel lonely at all.

Against this backdrop, more specific loneliness causes in previous empirical research can broadly be distinguished into relational, intrapersonal, situational, and cultural characteristics. Thus far, studies have mostly focused on the first two. For instance, relational causes of loneliness include few social interactions (De Jong Gierveld, Keating, & Fast, 2015), being unmarried, or low relationship quality (Hawkey et al., 2008). Intrapersonal causes of loneliness include genetic disposition (Matthews et al., 2016), higher introversion, or higher neuroticism (Buecker, Maes, Denissen, & Luhmann, 2020). Similarly, causes that were *perceived* by lay people in Canada (Rokach, 1989) could broadly be grouped into relational deficits, characterological/developmental variables and traumatic events (see Table S1.1c in Appendix S1 for the specific content of each category).

### 1.1.4 | Remedies for loneliness

Previous work has examined the relation between general coping styles and loneliness (e.g., problem- versus emotion-focused coping; Deckx, van den Akker, Buntinx, & van Driel, 2018) or the effectiveness of interventions against loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2015). However, research about *loneliness-specific remedies* that individuals apply themselves is sparse—at least among young and middle-aged adults (for coping strategies among older adults, see Kharicha, Manthorpe, Iliffe, Davies, & Walters, 2018; Schoenmakers, van Tilburg, & Fokkema, 2012). One exception is an analysis of Canadians' strategies to remedy loneliness, which distinguishes three phases (Rokach, 1990): acceptance (e.g., solitary activity, reflecting on, and accepting loneliness), transition (e.g., seeking professional support, religion, changing how one interacts with others), and reaching out to belong (e.g., re-establishing or improving relationships). Additional to such constructive strategies, individuals also reported self-destructive or nonbeneficial strategies (e.g., addiction, self-harm, avoidance, and self-induced isolation; see Table S1.1d in Appendix S1).

## 1.2 | Loneliness and differences in social embeddedness

Like most psychological research, research about loneliness has widely been conducted in the Global North (e.g., the United States, Canada, the Netherlands; Henrich et al., 2010). When compared to other parts of the world, these countries share a number of cultural elements (i.e., they contain some similar shared beliefs, norms, or values; Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg, & Wan, 2010). For instance, they are generally characterized by higher individualism (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), lower relational stability (i.e., cultural norms to hold on to existing social relationships; Heu, Hansen, & van Zomeren, 2019), or less restrictive norms about social relationships (i.e., fewer, less strict, and less demanding norms about social relationships; Heu et al., 2020). As such, the cultures in these countries can be described as *less socially embedded*<sup>2</sup>: Individuals are less embedded in tight social networks (e.g., families or communities), spend more time or are more likely to live alone, have less stable and less long-lasting relationships, and are more independent from each other when making choices.

Compared to less socially embedded cultures, we know little about loneliness in more socially embedded cultures. Indeed, existing quantitative studies about loneliness suggest a number of cultural differences: For one, average levels of loneliness seem to be higher in more than in less socially embedded cultures<sup>3</sup> (Fokkema, De Jong Gierveld, & Dykstra, 2012; Jylhä & Jokela, 1990; Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014; cf., Barreto et al., 2020): This is counterintuitive because living alone or being unmarried, for example, seem to increase the risk for loneliness (e.g., Hawkley et al., 2008; Swader, 2018). However, it also seems that causes of, or risks for, loneliness can differ across cultures. For instance, in different European countries, more interaction with family members was more strongly related to lower loneliness in countries where family relationships were more valued (i.e., in more collectivistic and supposedly more socially embedded cultures; Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014). Accordingly, we suggest in recent theorizing (Heu et al., 2020) that cultures with more, more demanding, and stricter norms about social relationships (e.g., more socially embedded cultures) may imply a higher risk of “emotional” and “perceived” isolation (e.g., lacking *individually fulfilling* social relationships; being dissatisfied with social relationships or shunned because one deviates from social norms) despite a lower risk of “physical isolation” (e.g., little social contact).

Importantly, such *quantitative* differences in risks for loneliness raise the question whether there are also *qualitative* differences in the phenomenon of loneliness—that is, whether the meaning of the term loneliness and the experiences it describes are similar across different cultures. For instance, loneliness is often viewed as particularly closely related to social isolation (e.g., De Jong Gierveld, Van Tilburg, & Dykstra, 2006) in less socially embedded cultures where individuals have a higher risk to become socially isolated. This might be different in cultures where individuals tend to move from birth to death in networks of stable relationships and are hardly ever alone. Similarly, in more socially embedded cultures, where individuals often live together with their families or in-laws, lacking understanding by family members may be a more prominent driver, and hence more central to definitions, of loneliness.

Indeed, in quantitative comparisons of *individuals' perceptions of loneliness* (e.g., experiential aspects, self-perceived causes, or coping strategies), Canadians scored higher on all scales than individuals from more socially embedded cultures (Croatians, Portuguese, Turks, or Argentinians; e.g., Rokach et al., 2001; Rokach & Bacanli, 2001; Rokach, Bacanli, & Rambran, 2000; cf., Rokach & Sharma, 1996). This may suggest that Canadians have more severe or more differentiated loneliness experiences. However, given that all questionnaires were based on descriptions of loneliness provided by Canadians (Rokach, 1988, 1989, 1990), while loneliness tends to be higher in more socially embedded cultures (e.g., Lykes & Kemmelmeier, 2014), these findings may also suggest that these questionnaires did not sufficiently consider aspects of loneliness in more socially embedded cultures.

In fact, most cross-cultural studies or quantitative research in more socially embedded cultures is based on loneliness conceptualizations and scales from less socially embedded cultures (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Rajesh & Rangaiah, 2019). Only few qualitative studies have also examined meanings of loneliness in more socially embedded groups: They suggest that loneliness experiences revolve around similar themes as in less socially embedded cultures (e.g., loneliness as related to impaired relationships; aversiveness), but also revealed some different aspects (e.g., disrespectfulness by younger generations as risk factor for loneliness among elderly people; e.g., Heravi-Karimooi, Anoosheh, Foroughan, Sheykhi, & Hajizadeh, 2010; Van der Geest, 2004). However, these qualitative studies were conducted in single cultural samples and among elderly people only, while *cross-cultural* qualitative research in broader age groups is missing.

### 1.3 | The current research

To examine the meaning of loneliness across cultures, we conducted a thematic analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews about definitions, perceived causes, and remedies for loneliness from contexts that should contain cultures with different levels of social embeddedness (Austria, Bulgaria, Israel, Egypt, and India). Specifically, we compared a selection of scientific conceptualizations of loneliness (which tend to be from less socially embedded cultures) with loneliness experiences from cultures with different levels of social embeddedness. This is relevant because loneliness and theorizing about it can only validly be compared across cultures in quantitative research if "loneliness" describes similar experiences.<sup>4</sup> The qualitative design of this study furthermore allowed us to identify aspects that are considered less in research from less socially embedded cultures.

We sampled from different countries in which less psychological research has been conducted than in Western European or Northern American countries (Henrich et al., 2010), with cultures of relatively high (except for Austria and possibly Bulgaria), yet different levels of social embeddedness. Through sampling from countries with different levels of social embeddedness, we could examine which differences in results may be due to differences between lay and scholarly conceptualizations of loneliness (e.g., by comparing Austrian interviews to our selection of conceptualizations in the literature), and which may be traced back to differences in social embeddedness (by comparing findings across samples and the literature). Conversations with informants from each culture and existing data about proxies of social embeddedness (see Table S1.2 in Appendix S1) suggested that Austria had the lowest, Bulgaria a low-moderate, Israel a moderate, and Egypt and India the highest levels of social embeddedness.<sup>5</sup>

More specifically, inhabitants of Austria and Bulgaria were comparatively likely to live alone (e.g., 36% of households in Austria were one-person households in 2011, as compared to only 4% in India in 2015; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2017, 2019). At the same time, households were, on average, smallest in these countries—with hardly any households with more than six members, or households with *both* children under the age of 15 and members above the age of 60 (i.e., 1% in Austria in 2011 as compared to 16% in India in 2015).<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, average households were approximately twice as large in Egypt and India as in Austria and Bulgaria (i.e., 4.1 household members in Egypt in 2014 and 4.6 in India in 2015, as compared to 2.3 in Austria and Bulgaria in 2011), with Israel falling in between on most of these household characteristics (e.g., 21% one-person households in 2008; an average household size of 3.1). These numbers illustrate that inhabitants of Egypt and India were most likely to start their own families, live together with their parents and extended families, and, therefore, to spend least time alone—particularly in comparison to Bulgaria or Austria.

Nevertheless, a recent meta-analysis suggests that more than 40% of Indians feel lonely to some extent (Hossain et al., 2020). For comparison, 28.7% of Israeli participants in the European Social Survey, 38.4% of Bulgarian participants, and 26.8% of Austrian participants indicated to have felt lonely in the previous week (Norwegian Centre for Research Data, 2012, 2014). Although comparable prevalence rates for loneliness are scarce, this suggests that the phenomenon of loneliness occurs and may be quite relevant across both less and more socially embedded cultures.



## 2 | METHOD

This study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Psychology at the University of Groningen. We conducted 42 semi-structured in-depth interviews in total, with seven Austrian, eight Bulgarian, eight Israeli, ten Egyptian, and nine Indian participants.<sup>7</sup>

### 2.1 | Recruitment

We estimated levels of social embeddedness based on interviews with informants from each country (e.g., about social evaluations of divorce, remaining unmarried, living alone, or living with one's parents as an adult), data about household characteristics (e.g., average household size, share of one-person households; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2017, 2019; see Table S1.2 in Appendix S1), and individualism–collectivism (Hofstede et al., 2010) as one proxy of social embeddedness (we assumed generally higher social embeddedness in more collectivistic cultures because more traditional forms of collectivism promote that individuals are embedded in stable—usually familial—social structures; Triandis, 1995). The specific choice of countries then depended on the availability of proficient collaborators.

We determined in advance to conduct between six and ten interviews in each country. This would allow us to examine differences and similarities of loneliness experiences within each cultural context, and was a realistic number to achieve. Due to the heterogeneity of loneliness experiences and definitions, theoretical saturation at a fine-grained level (i.e., for our inductive coding) could have been achieved with large numbers of participants only, and was hence not used to determine the number of interviews. However, with the realized sample sizes, we reached theoretical saturation at the broad, conceptual level that was the main focus of our deductive coding (because most participants reported multiple loneliness experiences, providing a broad range of different loneliness experiences in each sample).

We then used a mix of purposive sampling and convenience sampling (with snowballing): Specifically, we aimed to sample participants between the age of 25 and 45 (to add to a better understanding of loneliness in this age group; Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016), with similar shares of men and women, both individuals with and without partners and/or children, and some variation regarding education level (within each cultural context). In the Israeli context, we additionally aimed to interview both religious and nonreligious individuals. Participants were mostly recruited through interviewers' social networks because, in all contexts, individuals tended to be reluctant to talk about loneliness in an interview situation unless approached through personal contact. Except for one Indian participant whose interview we stopped after some initial questions (due to a lack of involvement), no participant dropped out during the interview. For sample characteristics (e.g., family status, demographic characteristics), see Table 1.

### 2.2 | Procedure and interviewer information (positionality)

Participants were invited to be interviewed and filmed<sup>8</sup> for a project about loneliness, and fully informed about the aim of the interviews and their rights. They could choose the locations for

**TABLE 1** Sample characteristics

	<b>Austrian sample (n = 7)</b>	<b>Bulgarian sample (n = 8)</b>	<b>Israeli sample (n = 8)</b>	<b>Egyptian sample (n = 10)</b>	<b>Indian sample (n = 9)</b>
Age range (in years)	26–45	27–44	26–39	25–44	24
Gender					
Men	5	3	4	5	5
Women	2	5	4	5	4
Family status					
Single	2	1	4	4	1
In partnership	5	7	4	6	8
Married/ registered partnership	1	4	3	4	8
Own children	2	2	3	4	4
Divorced	—	—	—	—	—
Household characteristics					
In one-person household	2	1	2	1	—
With partner (and children)	4	6	4	4	8
With family of origin	1	1	—	8	2
With in-laws	—	—	—	—	3
With housemates	—	—	2	1	1
Education level					
Minimum compulsory schooling	2	—	—	—	1
Secondary education	2	—	—	3	3
University education	3	8	8	7	5
Location of residence					
Urban area	7	6	6	10	5
Rural area	—	2	2	—	4

*Note:* Note that, in the Indian and Egyptian samples, interviewees who were married and did not live together with (or in immediate proximity to) their family of origin or in-laws had not necessarily chosen to do so. For instance, one Egyptian participant had been bereaved, whereas multiple Indian participants had, usually for work, moved away from their place of origin and families.

their interviews, provided that video or audio recordings would be possible (for more detailed information about interview settings, see section S1.1 in Appendix S1).



The principal investigator (PI), who integrated previous literature, attended and steered all interviews, and coded all interview material, was a cultural psychologist focusing on cultural norms and loneliness. During data collection, she was a 27-year-old female doctoral student with Caucasian appearance, who is originally from, and has grown up in Vienna, Austria. Importantly, she was thus from a less socially embedded cultural context.

In each research context (except for Austria), the PI co-conducted interviews with collaborators from the respective country: A 24-year-old female Bulgarian master student in psychology (from a town in the North-West of Bulgaria); a 37-year-old male Jewish-Israeli postdoctoral researcher in psychology (from Jerusalem); a 32-year-old male, or a 28-year-old female Egyptian translator (from Cairo/Gizeh); or a 22-year-old female Indian pre-master student in psychology (from Bangalore). All except for the Egyptian interviewers had received university education in psychology, but none except for the PI had experience with qualitative research or research in the field of loneliness. Collaborators got involved because of their interest in the topic or project, or the learning experience the collaboration offered. Since we used the PI's or collaborators' social networks as well as snowballing in all research contexts, most interviewees were indirectly or directly acquainted with the interviewers (i.e., as friends, acquaintances, colleagues, family members, or acquaintances of these).

Interviews were conducted in the respective local language, and collaborators paraphrased responses in English so that the PI could probe and adjust the course of the interview. All interviews were translated into, and analyzed, in English. Interview length varied between around 10 and around 60 min.<sup>9</sup> After some initial small-talk, an introduction, and two superficial questions about participants' family status, we asked about personal experiences of loneliness, including questions about perceived causes of loneliness (e.g., *What do you think made you feel lonely then?*), ways of coping with, and perceived remedies for loneliness (e.g., *What helped you feel less lonely?*, *How did your loneliness disappear again?*, *Which advice would you give to someone who feels lonely?*), as well as own definitions of loneliness (e.g., *How would you explain what loneliness is to someone who has never felt lonely?*). If participants had hardly ever felt lonely, we asked what they thought had protected them, and about their perception of loneliness experiences among others in their social surroundings. Before answering a final question about their advice for a lonely person, participants filled in a short, written questionnaire with demographic questions, questions about relationships and about cultural characteristics. The purpose of this order was to monitor and avoid that participants would leave the interview in agitation (for the full interview guide and a brief summary of answers to the written questionnaire, see sections S1.2 and S1.3 in Appendix S1).

## 2.3 | Data preparation and analytical approach

Interviews were translated into English and/or transcribed by translators, international students, or the PI. Translations were then double-checked by collaborators or translators.

We conducted a thematic analysis (in line with Braun & Clarke, 2006), combining a theoretical (i.e., deductive) approach (to examine whether the selected loneliness conceptualizations from the literature could be used to describe loneliness experiences in more socially embedded cultures) with an inductive analysis (to identify possible novel or less considered aspects). More specifically, we first integrated the selected loneliness definitions, and taxonomies of causes and remedies from the literature (e.g., Perlman & Peplau, 1981; Rokach, 1988, 1989, 1990) into broader frameworks that would allow to compare this previous work with our own findings

(see Figure 2a and Table S1.1 in Appendix S1). In a first coding round, we then applied concepts and themes from previous research to our interview data (i.e., deductive coding). Furthermore, we added or split existing into multiple codes (a) if we had not encountered an aspect in the literature before (e.g., resolving loneliness by sorting out one's relationships); (b) if we suspected that an aspect of loneliness was specific to a certain culture (e.g., "bad habits" as cause for loneliness in the Indian sample); (c) if we suspected that an aspect might systematically differ between cultural samples (e.g., unfulfilling *family* relationships as potentially more relevant loneliness cause in more than in less socially embedded samples); or (d) if, within a category, a specific aspect seemed particularly meaningful because it was emphasized by multiple participants (e.g., not being able to be oneself around others as more specific cause within personal characteristics causing loneliness). Furthermore, we also relabeled or regrouped codes into themes in a way that best described our interview data.

After the first coding round, we revised the coding scheme by combining or dropping highly specific codes that turned out not to be culture-specific and/or that occurred too infrequently to allow for an examination of cultural differences. For loneliness definitions and remedies, we reduced the number of codes less than for loneliness causes. This is because less is known about coping strategies or remedies for loneliness, while definitions of loneliness were too diverse to be meaningfully summarized by broader categories only.

Based on these revisions, codes in our final codebook deviate from previous schemes to better fit the current data, and because of lacking convergence of categories and labels in the literature: For instance, *personal factors* (Perlman & Peplau, 1981) and *characterological variables* (Rokach, 1989) summarize similar, yet slightly different sub-themes. To make links and differences between our final coding scheme and existing conceptualizations in the literature transparent, we connect our codes and themes back to categories and themes from the research literature in Table S1.1 in Appendix S1, and in the codebook.

All interviews were then coded a second time by the PI with a widely semantic and realist approach (codes were based on the explicit content of participants' accounts rather than on what was driving their narratives). However, some of the coding was also latent to apply more abstract categories from the literature (e.g., lack of attachment; Weiss, 1974) to the reported concrete loneliness experiences. Coding was done by the PI only (i.e., a single rater) because it required extensive knowledge of the research literature on loneliness. However, codes, their labels, and their grouping into themes were repeatedly discussed with the second and third authors of the paper, and interpretations were checked by the native collaborators from each research context.

In a final step, we compared the broad framework we had derived from the literature with frameworks from our interview data (see Figures 1–3, Table S1.1 in Appendix S1, and codebook). Taking a more quantitative approach, we also examined whether certain codes were clearly more prevalent in some than in other contexts.

### 3 | RESULTS

To examine whether the meaning of loneliness is comparable across cultures with different levels of social embeddedness, we analyzed whether our selection of influential conceptualizations from the literature were reflected in individuals' reports of loneliness in samples with different levels of social embeddedness. We also examined whether we could identify potentially under-researched aspects or cross-cultural differences. We will provide key quotes for our findings here, and a more extensive selection in Appendix S2.

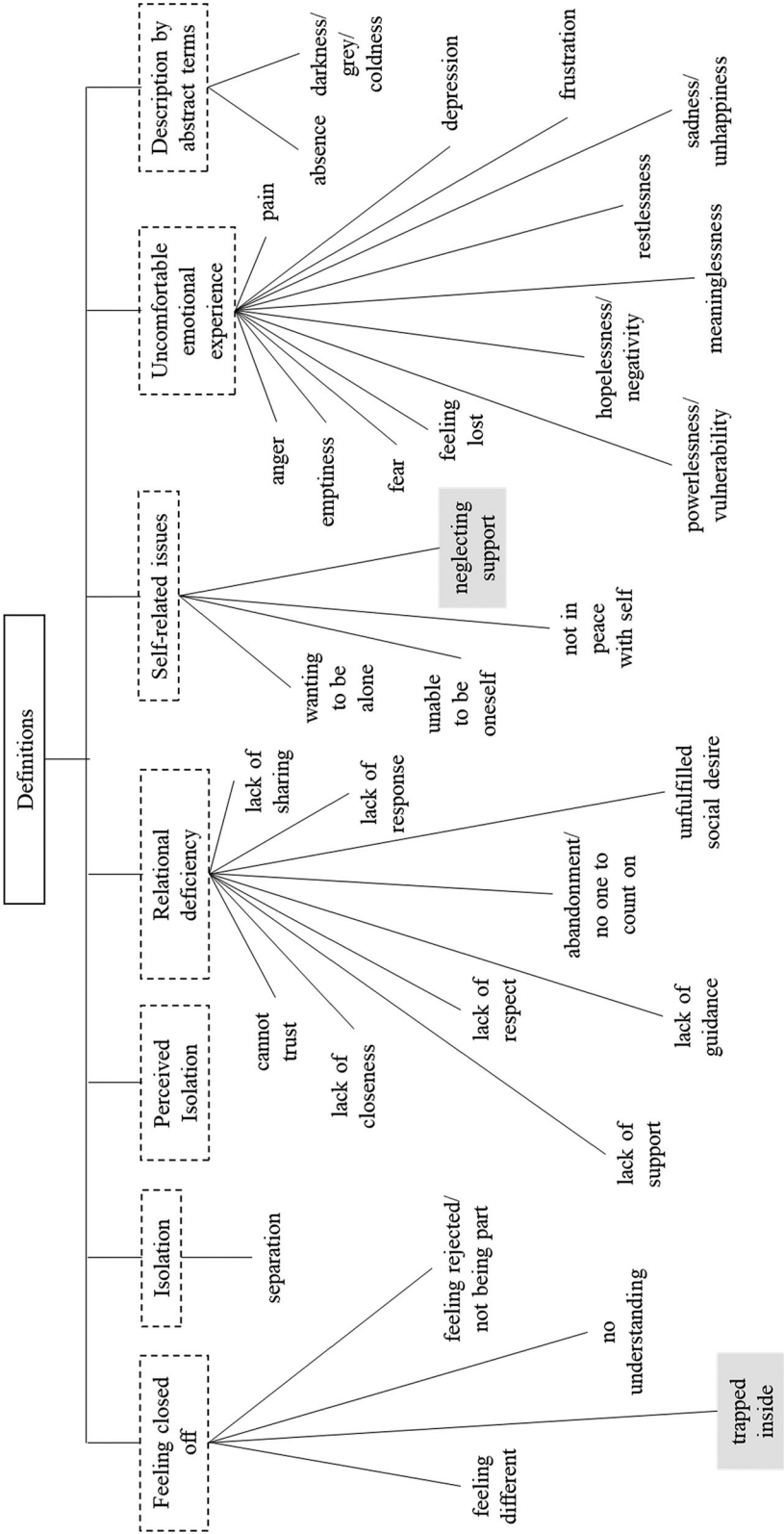
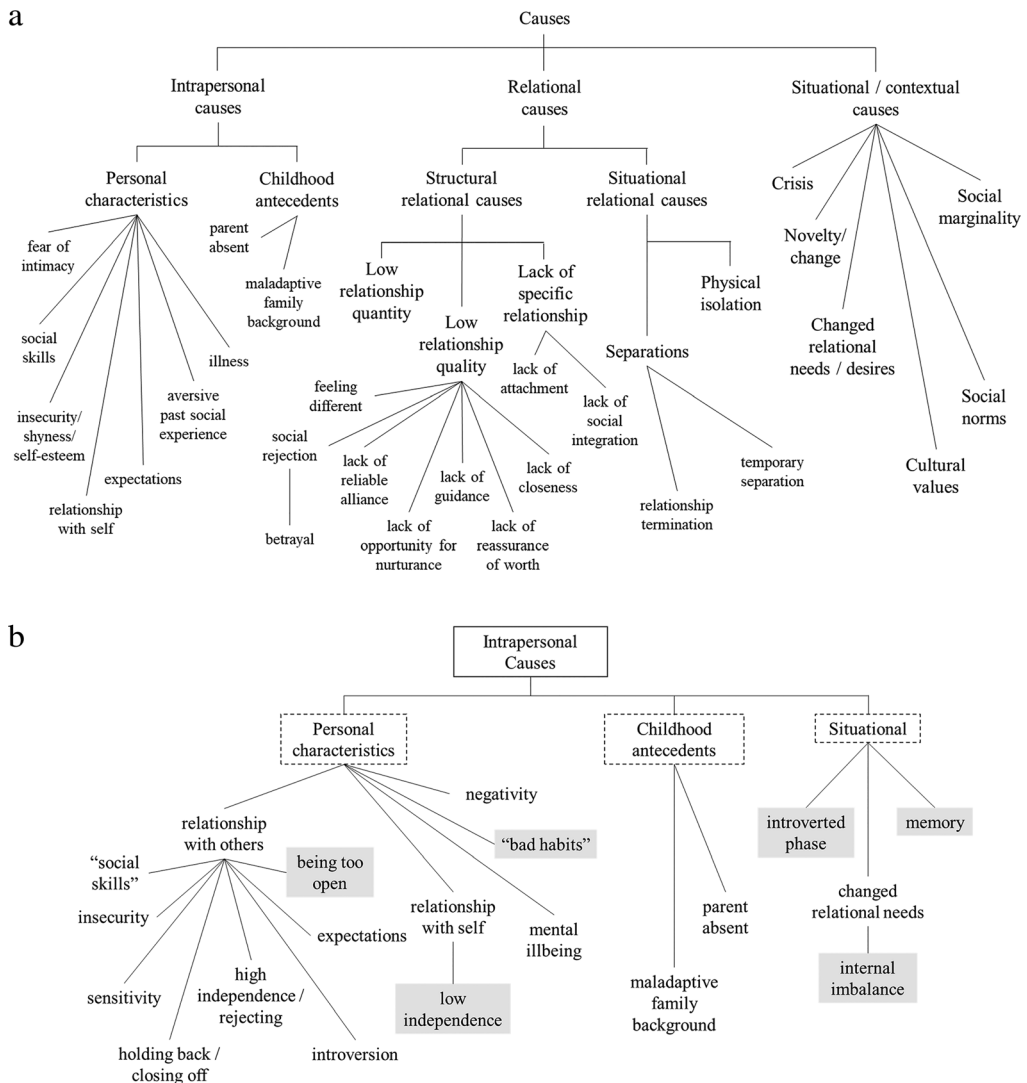


FIGURE 1 Loneliness definitions in our data. Note: Grey fields indicate codes or themes that have not been described in the literature before

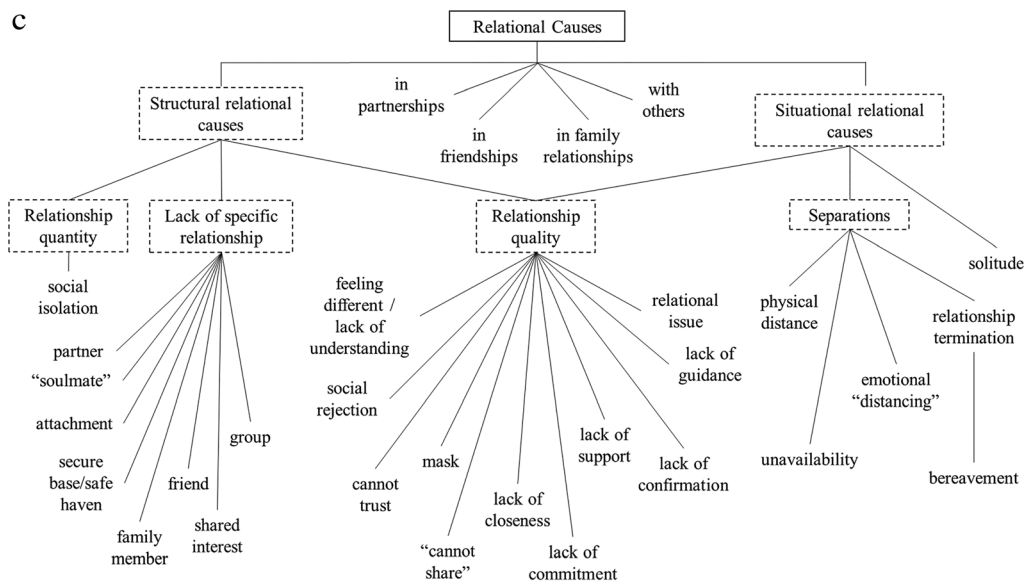


**FIGURE 2** (a) Overview of loneliness causes in the literature. (b–d) Loneliness causes in our data. *Note:* Grey fields indicate codes or themes that have not been described in the literature before

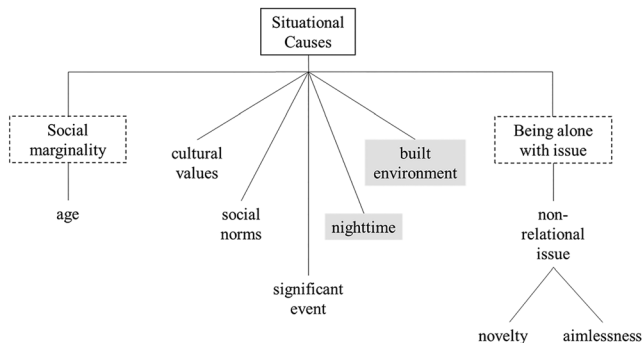
### 3.1 | Definitions of loneliness

Explicit definitions of loneliness converged across cultural contexts, with a taxonomy of reported loneliness experiences by Canadians (Rokach, 1988), and with multiple definitions of loneliness in the literature (e.g., Hays & DiMatteo, 1987; Perlman & Peplau, 1981; VanderWeele et al., 2012). To summarize, loneliness was cross-culturally (a) described by experiences of some impairment of the relation between the self and the outside world, (b) viewed as different from being alone, (c) experienced as aversive or negative, yet as potentially beneficial, and (d) described as similar to depression (see Figure 1; see Table S2.1 in Appendix S2 for additional quotes). Notably, experiences of loneliness were highly diverse (in line with Rokach, 1988)—yet mostly *within*, and not systematically so *between* cultural samples.

c



d

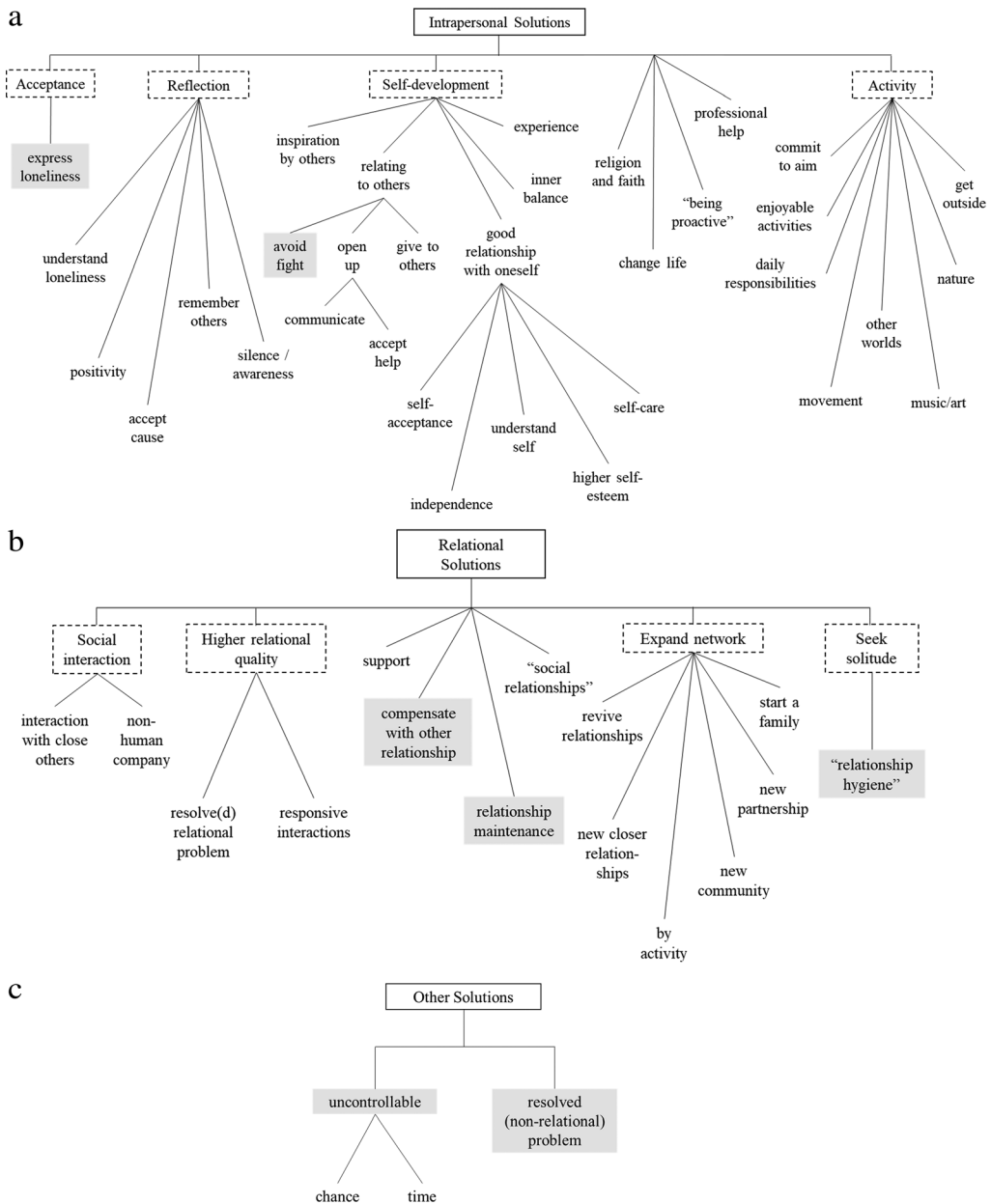
**FIGURE 2** (Continued)

More specifically, definitions included feeling closed off from others (e.g., not feeling understood, feeling rejected, feeling trapped inside oneself), shortcomings in relationships (e.g., lacking closeness or love, support, not being able to count on, or share one's thoughts with others), or descriptions of perceived or actual isolation (including separations).

I4 (Israeli, female, 26): So, I think that it's like living life, where there is always double glass. So, you always feel like there is something separating you from everyone else—there is something happening inside you, and there is the outside world. And between them, there is this double glass, and you can't reach it, even if it's so close.

Furthermore, participants associated loneliness with various aversive emotional experiences (e.g., sadness, fear, or hopelessness) and issues with oneself (e.g., not being able to be, or disliking oneself).

I2 (Israeli, female, 33): Not being in peace with yourself, and then, that sense of loneliness is one of the symptoms. It can be expressed with millions of other symptoms. To me, the sense of loneliness is a symptom for that.



**FIGURE 3** (a–c) Loneliness remedies in our data. *Note:* For a comparison with the literature, see Table S1.1 in Appendix S1. Grey fields indicate codes or themes that have not been described in the literature before

Loneliness was associated with similar states as depression (in line with Cacioppo et al., 2010)—including, for instance, meaninglessness, helplessness, powerlessness, emptiness, restlessness, or frustration.

Although some participants defined loneliness by (perceived) isolation, the large majority in all samples implicitly or explicitly emphasized the difference between solitude and loneliness. Whereas solitude was viewed as potentially enjoyable, loneliness itself was usually described as

aversive. Nevertheless, many participants viewed loneliness as purposeful—for instance, as an opportunity for personal development or to appreciate fulfilling social relationships more.

IN1 (Indian, female, 38): But the positive thing is, like, when you are lonely, you keep thinking and you heal yourself. So, it makes your healing also faster.

### 3.2 | Types of loneliness

We found indications of emotional, social, and existential loneliness across samples (for additional quotes, see Table S2.2 in Appendix S2), but experiences of social or emotional loneliness *as initially described in the literature* (i.e., as structural shortcomings in one's relational network; Weiss, 1973) and as illustrated by the quote below (for emotional loneliness) were rare.

B4 (Bulgarian, female, 27): I was missing a part of me, I was missing what actually gives a person the feeling of being fulfilled. [...] Not being able to reveal your soul in front of anyone.... Like, I can, through my work – making music – that's a kind of revealing the soul, but that's like making a painting, as in, the painting is there but not everyone understands it. And people just come and go, they don't establish a permanent, long-lasting contact with you. So, in reality, it's the connection to someone close to you, in my opinion. In my case, I needed a partner, um... Some people need their family...

Indeed, individuals often felt lonely because they were missing some specific relational quality in a specific situation (e.g., when not fitting in on an evening out, when lacking guidance regarding a life decision; see section about “Loneliness despite fulfilling relationships” below and “situational loneliness” in Table S2.1 in Appendix S2 for quotes). These individuals may hence be viewed as temporarily emotionally lonely, but only in a very broad interpretation of emotional loneliness. Existential loneliness (i.e., feeling lonely because of the separateness that is inherent to the human experience) hardly occurred.

Furthermore, although most instances of loneliness were indeed situational (i.e., bound to a specific event, such as a separation, an unenjoyable evening out), around half of the participants (distributed over all samples) described feelings of loneliness that persisted for a long time or even throughout large parts of their lives (i.e., chronic loneliness).

E7 (Egyptian, female, 35): Yes, I get that feeling all the time. Although I know many people and have many good friends whom I love and who love me, I still get that feeling of loneliness even when they are around me, indeed.

Notably, such chronic loneliness was often described as latently present and clearly perceptible only in specific situations (or as usually present, and sometimes suppressed).

B3 (Bulgarian, male, 33): It's not present all the time but there are often moments in which you pass the loneliness threshold, if we could call it like that. [...] I can describe it as a heartbeat. You know, sometimes it's up and sometimes you're below that threshold, but [...] often, actually, you're probably above it.



### 3.3 | Causes and remedies

Across the different cultural samples, causes and remedies for loneliness could nicely be fit into the broad structure that we derived from existing literature. Together with the convergent definitions of loneliness, this suggests similar meanings of loneliness across cultures with distinct levels of social embeddedness.<sup>10</sup> For a comparison of coding schemes from the literature versus from these interviews, see Figures 1 to 3, Table S1.1 in Appendix S1, as well as the codebook.

However, the absence of *fundamental qualitative* differences we observed does not necessarily imply that there are no cultural differences in reported loneliness experiences altogether. Although broad definitions, perceived causes, and remedies for loneliness seemed to be similar, we observed some differences in the manifestation of certain themes (e.g., whether a new partnership as remedy for loneliness usually meant getting married or starting to date a girlfriend/boyfriend; see Table S2.3 in Appendix S2). As such, certain concrete examples were specific to one or a few cultural samples. For instance, only in the Indian sample, participants explicitly talked about “bad habits” such as being lazy, aggressive, or unwilling to work as cause of loneliness.

IN8 (Indian, male, 27): For example, if I am doing anything wrong, nobody will be with me. Drinking, roaming and fighting around here and there, nobody will let me be around them then. [...] If you make those mistakes, you'll have to live a lonely life and remain in those thoughts.

Relatedly, we observed potential differences in the importance of specific themes. For instance, high independence from others was more often mentioned as loneliness cause in highly embedded samples; a maladaptive family background during childhood was more often mentioned as cause of later loneliness in less embedded samples.

E7 (Egyptian, female, 35): When I have trouble to deal with something and I feel that I need to ask someone for help, but I don't know how to do that, because I'm the kind of person who doesn't know how to ask for help. So, in these very moments, I feel that I'm so lonely.

A1 (Austrian, male, 35): And I don't think that it was because my parents didn't love me, but—I think that all—everyone loves their children. But many people are not aware that they are not able to properly communicate their love—or to pass it on or have not learnt to express it openly. And that they are actually lonely themselves, and that they, as such, hand down their loneliness. And it takes a long time to deconstruct something like this.

#### 3.3.1 | Aspects that have been considered less in the loneliness literature

Additional to examining whether the loneliness experiences in our interviews generally *fit into* selected previous conceptualizations of loneliness, we also wanted to examine whether they would reveal aspects that had not been considered yet. Although we did not

detect *novel* aspects, we identified aspects that have been less considered in this literature. Surprisingly, these were not unique to more socially embedded contexts. For instance, (a) individuals mostly experienced loneliness *despite* having fulfilling social relationships (in line with Moustakas, 1972) and (b) loneliness was often resolved by higher independence from others and social withdrawal (instead of more social contact or relationships; for additional quotes, see Table S2.4 in Appendix S2).

### *Loneliness despite fulfilling social relationships*

Previous literature has focused much on shortcomings of social relationships as cause of loneliness (Hawkey et al., 2008). Accordingly, impairments of relationship quality such as feeling different from, or misunderstood by others, lacking support, or separations were recurrent themes in our interviews as well. However, relational causes for loneliness often emerged in *specific* relationship domains or were bound to *specific* situations (see “situational loneliness” in Table S2.1 in Appendix S2 for quotes) rather than being general relational shortcomings—which is in contrast to what is typically measured in empirical studies (e.g., overall relationship quantity or quality; Heu, van Zomeren, & Hansen, 2019).

IN10 (Indian, male, 28): Most of the people in office: they like to drink, they like to party. [...] I don't like to drink, I don't like to party. I don't fall in that, you know, uh that category of people at all. [...] For example, there's gonna be a promotion party. [...] Then I'll usually end up sitting in a corner, and having uh – having Sprite or Coke or something [...] by myself. So, I feel very lonely at that point [...]. It's the misfit in the environment that I'm uh – there.

Furthermore, although loneliness was usually viewed as the *subjective experience* of unfulfilling social relationships, many participants identified causes that were quite unrelated to social relationships. Most prominently, loneliness seems to not only cause instability, unease, or ill-being (Cacioppo et al., 2015), but to sometimes also be their result (in line with Moustakas, 1972). For instance, interviewees reported feeling lonely when faced with *problems or decisions*. Indeed, despite being supported by others, they often felt lonely because they ultimately had to resolve problems and make decisions themselves:

I6 (Israeli, male, 35): There was a period that was extremely difficult and stressful, where I felt that I was alone. Despite having partners, despite having a community around me that was supportive and invested in me—my father worked alongside me—I felt alone. Because it was my responsibility to deal with things that were extremely difficult and complex.

E6 (Egyptian, male, 40): Well, if you find something that makes you happy in life or something that pulls you out of hardships or problems, that's when you don't feel loneliness. But as long as there are problems or difficulties in your life, you feel lonely. [...] As long as you're financially sufficient in life, you don't feel lonely.

Related to that, others described loneliness when in a *novel or unstructured situation* or when *lacking an aim*:

I8 (Israeli, female, 32): That you can't find some kind of purpose for yourself, some kind of goal, something that you do that is making you understand why you were put here on this earth. So, you'll feel lonely—no matter how many people you have around you. [...] But you just don't feel like you're living the life that you want to live. Then, no matter what, you'll feel a sense of loneliness.

Furthermore, multiple participants viewed *internal instability* or a *difficult relationship with themselves* as the true cause of their loneliness (e.g., little self-love, little self-acceptance, difficulty being or deciding by oneself).<sup>11</sup> This is related to, yet slightly different from previous research, which viewed, for instance, low self-esteem as cause of loneliness *because it should hamper relationships with others* (Perlman & Peplau, 1981; Rokach, 1989). Although some participants followed this reasoning, others eventually noticed that their longings in relationships were unrealistically demanding, or that even their fulfillment would not erase loneliness. Indeed, some participants explained that their longing for different relationships had only been a symptom of their unfulfilling relationship with themselves (in line with Moustakas, 1972):

I2 (Israeli, female, 33): The loneliness came from the inside, the outside is not... like, it's something that I have with myself – the difficulty of being alone with myself in peace. So, the environment is distracting, but it's not solving the problem. [...] When you are in a relationship, it's – you let somebody else accept you, love you, you know – you don't have to do it yourself. But, you know, that's something I learned through the years, that, if you don't do it yourself, it won't come from outside.

As such, loneliness may sometimes feel, but not actually be, about social relationships.

#### *Higher independence and social withdrawal as remedies*

In line with the above, many interviewees reported that their loneliness had been diminished by reducing contact with, or dependency on others (e.g., through a better relationship with themselves). Accordingly, solitude or solitary activity were relevant coping strategies both in this and previous research (e.g., focusing on daily responsibilities or enjoyable leisure activities; Rokach, 1990). However, previous literature mostly presents solitary involvement as preparation for eventually reaching out to others again, and social withdrawal sometimes even as maladaptive reaction to loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2015; Rokach, 1988, 1990). This is in contrast to perceptions by many interviewees in this study. Although they acknowledged the importance of strong social relationships, they perceived self-focused or solitary coping strategies as ultimately more effective (see quote above).

Additionally, many interviewees perceived a *reduction* rather than the expansion, of their social contacts or networks as a remedy for their loneliness. Specifically, they identified sorting out their relationships as relevant coping strategy:

B6 (Bulgarian, female, 27): There was a point when I was very discouraged about my environment and I constantly surrounded myself with new people. I tried one environment, I tried another, I was straight up, “scattering” myself. And I still didn't feel okay with those people, I couldn't have a meaningful conversation, um... Until I started practicing “hygiene” towards the people close to me. [...] And it's very important that a person realizes this eventually and is not afraid of removing all the friends around them,

but keeps their closest ones. Like, now, years later, I have fewer friends, I see fewer friends, like, we're all busy, but, um... I know that we are very close and I feel very comfortable with them. I've never felt lonely with them.

Specifically, participants explained that social withdrawal or solitude could reduce the number of loneliness-eliciting interactions, allow to process loneliness-eliciting events, order one's thoughts, reach more inner balance, obtain a better relationship with oneself, or prevent being overwhelmed by additional stimulation from the outside:

IN4 (Indian, female, 29): Being alone helps me. During that time, I cool down and I won't take any tension. Suppose I was with others and talked about it—that would remind me of it.

Regarding this paradoxical relation between loneliness and solitude, we additionally observed some potential cultural differences: Solitude was perceived both as cause and remedy for loneliness in all samples, but appeared to be perceived as *remedy* more often in more socially embedded samples (and as cause slightly more often in less socially embedded samples). In line with that, only in more socially embedded samples, loneliness was by some participants perceived as strongly intertwined with wanting to be alone (in line with Cacioppo et al., 2015; Rokach, 1990):

E9 (Egyptian, male, 25): You always feel that you want to be alone, uh... You don't want to talk to anybody, you don't want to argue or discuss with anybody about any topic.

IN4 (Indian, female, 29): I felt that I didn't need anybody: 'I should live alone, I should be alone' – that's when it (loneliness) came to my mind.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

To examine whether the meaning of “loneliness” is similar across cultures with different levels of social embeddedness, we compared selected conceptualizations of loneliness (e.g., Perlman & Peplau, 1981; Rokach, 1988, 1989, 1990) with loneliness experiences in in-depth interviews from five countries with different levels of social embeddedness. We specifically examined lay definitions, perceived causes and remedies, which together define the phenomenon of loneliness and are pivotal for the development of culture-sensitive interventions. Across the board, we did not find fundamental qualitative differences: Individuals in all cultures seemed to know loneliness and, for instance, experience it because of unsatisfying relationship quality, separations, or feeling different or misunderstood. This is reassuring with an eye to the validity of previous cross-cultural findings about loneliness, and encouraging for future research in the field.

Although we did not encounter aspects that were entirely novel to the literature (i.e., that could not be fit into previous conceptualizations or taxonomies), we identified some aspects that have been considered less in previous research literature: (a) That loneliness often emerges despite generally fulfilling social relationships, and (b) that higher independence from others

(e.g., through a better relationship with oneself) and social withdrawal can be important remedies for loneliness. Although not entirely new to the literature (e.g., Moustakas, 1972; Rokach, 1989, 1990), the dominance of these themes was striking given the strong focus on social relationships as loneliness cause or remedy in public opinion (e.g., Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2020) and many interventions (e.g., Local Government Association, 2016). Furthermore, we observed some potential cultural differences in particularly common aspects of loneliness experiences (e.g., solitude as more common perceived remedy for loneliness in more socially embedded cultures), and in the specific examples and situations within broader themes (e.g., solitude as loneliness cause or remedy typically referred to temporarily withdrawing from others in a shared family home in more socially embedded cultures, but to living and spending entire days alone in less socially embedded cultures). As such, our findings can also provide concrete starting points for future research about loneliness and for a cultural psychology of loneliness in particular.

#### 4.1 | Implications for theorizing and research about culture and loneliness

Our finding that conceptions of loneliness converged across samples and with multiple influential conceptualizations in the literature suggests that loneliness is comparable across cultures with different levels of social embeddedness. This is encouraging for cross-cultural research about loneliness, yet counter to the notion that such different cultures cause qualitative differences in the phenomenon itself. One explanation is that aspects of social embeddedness seemed comparatively irrelevant for loneliness in our interviews: Social loneliness (i.e., feeling lonely because of lacking relationships or social interaction) was rare, while most individuals reported feeling lonely without being alone or even despite generally fulfilling social relationships (in line with Moustakas, 1972). This suggests that most variation in loneliness stems from factors that can occur in both more and less socially embedded cultures (e.g., separations, insecurities, relational or nonrelational problems).

Notably, an absence of fundamental qualitative differences, as observed in the current research, does not rule out the possibility of *quantitative* cultural differences (e.g., different prevalence of certain causes or remedies). For instance, we observed that solitude seemed to more often be viewed as remedy for loneliness in more socially embedded samples (and potentially more often as cause in less socially embedded samples). Clearly, such differences need to be interpreted with caution because of our small samples and convenience sampling—a robust interpretation would require in-depth ethnological knowledge and quantitative research. Nevertheless, theoretically, a higher likelihood of solitude and social isolation in less embedded cultures (e.g., due to the option of living alone or divorcing) may indeed make solitude a more common and salient cause of loneliness (Heu et al., 2020). By contrast, in more socially embedded cultures, less freedom to choose one's relationships may more often bind individuals to unfulfilling (potentially loneliness-eliciting) relationships (Heu et al., 2020; Kito, Yuki, & Thomson, 2017). As much as social interaction may ease the loneliness of the socially isolated, solitude may ease the loneliness of those whose relationships are unresponsive (e.g., unsupportive, less emotionally close). Solitude may hence have a double role regarding loneliness across cultures, yet the frequency with which it is cause or remedy may differ by level of social embeddedness.

Furthermore, such an absence of fundamental qualitative differences does not rule out that abstract causes and remedies are manifested in different culture-specific situations or words.

For instance, solitude was more likely to refer to being in an apartment where one lived by oneself in less socially embedded cultures versus to being alone in a room in an apartment that was shared with family members in more socially embedded cultures. Although only the first may count as solitude from a less socially embedded perspective, individuals in the latter situation were in solitude *relative* to what they were used to.

Finally, we note that our observation of aspects that have been considered *less* in previous literature partly overlaps with work by Moustakas (1972) on existential loneliness. This may be rather unsurprising given that most current research is grounded in a cognitive perspective on loneliness (i.e., loneliness as consequence of a perceived discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships; Johnson & Mullins, 1987; Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Unlike most such current empirical work, theorizing about existential loneliness suggests that loneliness often does not result from unsatisfying relationships with others. Instead, loneliness can emerge in the face of life stressors and problems, a lack of purpose in life, or a poor relationship with oneself. Given that these were prominent perceived loneliness causes across our samples, future *empirical* research may need to consider types of loneliness that are unrelated to the quantity or quality of an individual's social network.

## 4.2 | Practical implications

The convergence of loneliness experiences across cultural samples and literature suggests that effective interventions against loneliness that have been developed in less socially embedded cultures may provide useful starting points for interventions in cultures of higher social embeddedness. Nevertheless, differences in prevalence and concrete manifestations of abstract causes or remedies also indicate that interventions may need culture-specific adjustments. For instance, across cultures, loneliness emerged after separating from a partner. However, in more socially embedded cultures, this usually referred to the end of a nonsexual, pre-marital connection or engagement, implying the loss of a close emotional bond and/or the perspective of a shared future. By contrast, in less embedded cultures, this typically referred to the end of quite committed partnerships, with significant upheavals in the partners' lives (e.g., moving houses; losing shared social contacts) and a stronger decrease in physical intimacy. Despite similar reasons for feeling lonely, individuals in these different cultures may thus require quite different interventions.

Indeed, even *within* one culture, a one-size-fits-all intervention may be insufficient. Loneliness emerged for highly diverse reasons and was resolved in very different ways within each sample (in line with Rokach, 1988). As such, a remedy for some may exacerbate loneliness for others. For instance, many interventions revolve around increased social interaction (e.g., telephone helplines or community meals; Local Government Association, 2016). However, many chronically lonely interviewees described feeling lonely even or *particularly when* surrounded by others. Such interventions may hence help those who feel lonely *because of being isolated* (e.g., elderly people), but may even be counterproductive for others. This calls for loneliness interventions that address loneliness *causes* rather than interventions that are targeted at the experience of loneliness itself.

Relatedly, our results suggest that, rather than increasing relational provisions only (e.g., increasing social interaction, strengthening social networks), interventions may also aim at decreases in demands from relationships (e.g., increasing comfort with occasional solitude; increasing emotional independence). This is because, for one, relational needs that caused loneliness were often too specific or situation-bound to be fulfillable by a change to individuals' social networks. Furthermore, particularly individuals with more chronic forms of loneliness



reported less loneliness after reducing their relational needs: They had focused on duties or enjoyable activities, accepted loneliness as part of their lives, accepted occasional disharmonies in relationships, or developed higher self-acceptance.

### 4.3 | Limitations and future directions

One limitation of this study is the use of convenience sampling. Most participants were recruited through collaborators' networks because this allowed us to access participants who might otherwise have been reluctant to be interviewed about a sensitive topic like loneliness. At the same time, this may have reduced internal and external validity of our results: Participants may, for instance, have been less willing to report experiences that concerned their relation with the interviewer (e.g., friendship) or with a person that both were acquainted with. They may also have been less likely to report feeling lonely because of social isolation than those whom we did not reach. Certain topics, such as shame, social exclusion, or isolation may therefore be underrepresented in our data. Nevertheless, there are several reasons why we believe that this limitation does not invalidate our conclusions.

For one, despite convenience sampling, we obtained samples with diverse loneliness experiences (e.g., different frequency or longevity) and that differed on other relevant characteristics (e.g., social isolation; marital status). Furthermore, the level of acquaintance with the interviewer appeared to not importantly affect what was disclosed: For instance, even friends of interviewers were not reluctant to tell if the lack of a close friend had caused their loneliness. Finally, our results widely converged with findings in Canadian studies (Rokach, 1988, 1989, 1990), in which answers were written and hence more anonymized. Nevertheless, we encourage future research to replicate our findings with exclusively purposive sampling, and no personal relationship between interviewers and interviewees.

Another limitation of this study is that results were analyzed by the PI only (i.e., a single rater with European background), and in English instead of the language of the interview.<sup>12</sup> This was necessary because coding required extensive knowledge about the loneliness literature. To reduce the risk that conclusions reflect the PI's or a European perspective only, observations and conclusions were discussed with collaborators. No clear differences in interpretations emerged. Furthermore, although translations may have resulted in the loss of some cultural nuances (e.g., if the direct translation of a word had a different connotation than in the original language), they should not have strongly affected the validity of our conclusions: We were most interested in *broad* similarities and differences regarding loneliness definitions, perceived causes, and remedies. Nevertheless, to explore more fine-grained differences (e.g., for questionnaire development), data in future research may be analyzed in the language of the interview and by coders from different research contexts.

It is also important to note what the results of this study *cannot* offer. For one, they do not allow for conclusions about *actual* loneliness causes or remedies. Causes and remedies that are *perceived* by lay people help to understand whether “loneliness” describes a similar experience across cultures, but not necessarily what actually causes or resolves it. Second, our findings do not allow for conclusions about the *prevalence* of (perceived) causes or remedies in different cultures (e.g., Rokach & Bacanli, 2001; Rokach et al., 2000, 2001). Due to the qualitative design of this study, we could, thus far, only observe *tendencies* regarding frequency or relevance of aspects of the loneliness experience. We hence recommend to conduct longitudinal and quantitative studies in the future (e.g., based on taxonomies derived from this qualitative data; see



Figures 2–3 and codebook) to (a) better understand *actual* causes and remedies, and (b) to compare the prevalence of loneliness causes or remedies across different cultures.

Finally, our finding that there were no fundamental qualitative differences in loneliness experiences *in this set of samples* does not imply that there are no such cross-cultural differences at all. For instance, it is possible that cultures that differ on other dimensions than social embeddedness may reveal unique loneliness definitions, causes or remedies. Nevertheless, the finding that culturally very different samples (like those in the current study) share a similar notion of loneliness strongly suggests that loneliness may describe similar experiences across many cultures (e.g., in line with Cacioppo et al., 2013).

## 4.4 | Conclusion

In-depth interviews from five countries suggest that the meaning of the word “loneliness” and the experiences it describes may be similar across cultures with different levels of social embeddedness. More specifically, selected influential conceptualizations in the literature seemed to quite accurately describe loneliness experiences across both less and more socially embedded cultures: Definitions, causes, and remedies generally converged with those reported by lay people from cultures with different levels of social embeddedness. Although we did not encounter aspects that seemed entirely novel to this literature, we identified aspects that have been considered less: that loneliness frequently emerges despite fulfilling social relationships or that social withdrawal and higher independence (rather than more social contact) may be important remedies. We also identified potential cultural differences in relevance and specific manifestations of certain aspects (e.g., solitude typically meant temporarily withdrawing from others in more embedded cultures and seemed to be a more common remedy than in less embedded cultures, where it often referred to living and spending days alone). In sum, findings from our rich interview data provide a first indication that loneliness may validly be examined across cultures with different levels of social embeddedness. As such, they pave the way for future cross-cultural research on loneliness, and suggest that influential conceptualizations in the loneliness literature may provide useful starting points to decrease loneliness across the globe.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data can be obtained by emailing Luzia C. Heu: luzia.heu@gmail.com.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The current literature on loneliness is extensive, which is why we mostly compare to a *selection* of conceptualizations or taxonomies that (a) seemed particularly influential for empirical research and/or subsequent theorizing, and that (b) are comparatively comprehensive (i.e., that summarize multiple different facets of loneliness, causes, or remedies).

<sup>2</sup> Notably, cultural characteristics can strongly vary within, as well as transcend, country borders. Individualism, relational stability (Heu, Hansen, & van Zomeren, 2019), restrictiveness (Heu et al., 2020), or social embeddedness should hence, *on average*, be higher or lower in a country, but levels can differ considerably between different cultural groups within that country (e.g., between more rural and more urban communities, communities with different political orientations, different age groups, or even different families).

- <sup>3</sup> We do not intend to equate culture (i.e., shared ideas such as norms, beliefs, or values; Chiu et al., 2010) with country (i.e., one “container” of culture or one type of cultural unit). However, since most cross-cultural research has used countries as proxies for different cultures, we use both terms to describe study results. Specifically, to refer to specific study results, we write country and, to describe interpretations thereof, we write culture.
- <sup>4</sup> We thus compare *lay people's* reports about their loneliness experiences to *scholars'* conceptualizations of loneliness. Notably, lay people's conceptions of loneliness, as well as what they *perceive* as causes and remedies can deviate from scholarly definitions, and empirically validated causes or remedies. However, since the *subjective experience* of loneliness can most directly be accessed through self-report, lay people's reports usually provide the basis for scholarly work (e.g., Rokach, 1988, 1989, 1990). As such, taxonomies that are based on lay people's reports often overlap with those that are derived more theoretically or even empirically (e.g., Perlman & Peplau, 1981 and Rokach, 1989 for loneliness causes).
- <sup>5</sup> These countries also differ in terms of wealth and education level: While the gross domestic product/capita in 2017 was \$59,111 in Austria and \$42,194 in Israel, it was \$24,561 in Bulgaria, and only \$12,250 in Egypt and \$7,034 in India (World Bank Data, 2017). Furthermore, the share of adolescents who were enrolled in secondary school was estimated to be 99% in Israel, 89% in Bulgaria and 87% Austria (2017), 83% in Egypt (2018), and 62% in India (2013).
- <sup>6</sup> Notably, no recent data about multigeneration households or extended family households was available for Austria, Bulgaria, or Israel. We speculate that these household forms occur too infrequently to be of statistical relevance in these countries—which would confirm their relatively lower level of social embeddedness.
- <sup>7</sup> We report results in line with the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ; Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007).
- <sup>8</sup> Interviews were video-recorded (instead of being audio-recorded only) because this research was combined with a film project about loneliness experiences. Participants could, however, opt out of the film project and have their interviews audio-recorded only.
- <sup>9</sup> Interview length varied considerably between participants (e.g., depending on personal relevance of loneliness; response styles) and countries. For instance, Egyptian interviewees tended to provide brief answers, while Bulgarian interviewees often embedded their answers in longer narratives. Additionally, the PI probed more in later interviews (e.g., in the Israeli or Indian samples) to deepen and broaden the information that had already been gained from the other interviews.
- <sup>10</sup> This does not mean that every theme that was mentioned in previous work was also mentioned in the current interviews. However, the broader *categories* of perceived causes and remedies converged.
- <sup>11</sup> Issues with oneself were coded as part of loneliness *definitions* if reported in response to how interviewees would explain what loneliness is, and as loneliness *cause* if they were reported in response to what interviewees believed had made them lonely (or if they implicitly described such issues as cause of their loneliness experience).
- <sup>12</sup> Four interviews in the Indian sample were conducted in English and hence analyzed in their original language. Furthermore, even though—for higher consistency—Austrian interviews were also analyzed in English, the PI was aware of the original meaning in German.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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