The issue of loneliness among the elderly from a life course perspective

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Outline

- Relevance
- Research question
- Impact of increasing diversity on issue of loneliness among the elderly
- Conceptual model
- Concluding remarks

Relevance

- Stereotype view of the ‘lonely elderly’
- Increasing concern
  - Number of single elderly increases (whether divorced or widowed) → *More loneliness among the elderly?*
  - Individualization → *More loneliness among the elderly?*
- Loneliness = important indicator of well-being, strongly correlates with health

Research question

- 30% of the elderly (aged 55+) moderately or strongly lonely
  - Diversity among the elderly increases (divorced elderly, differentiation ‘younger’ and ‘older elderly’, …)
  - ⇨Loneliness ~ singleness: too simplistic?

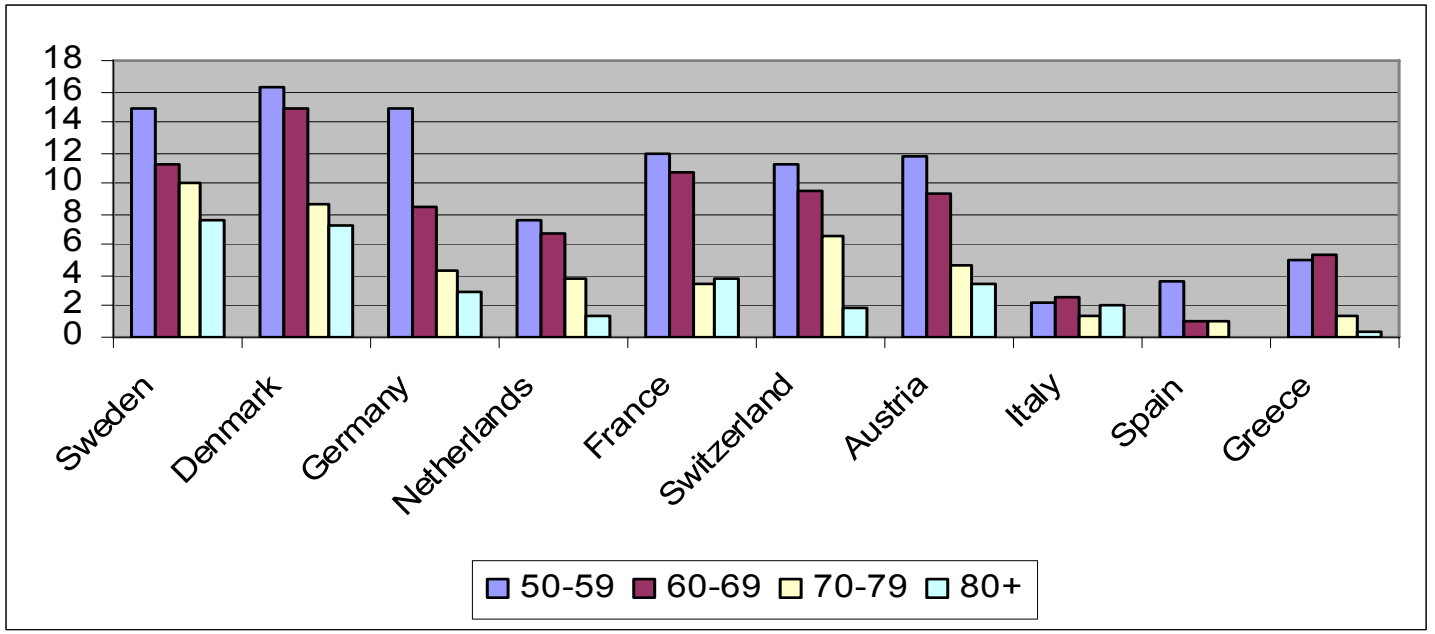
⇨How to understand loneliness among the elderly considering these changes?

Increasing diversity

⟶ *implications for the issue of loneliness?*

- ‘Second demographic transition’: increasing proportion of divorced elderly ⇨divorced elderly more lonely?

Figure : Divorce rate by age and country



Source: SHARE 2005

Increasing diversity

⟶ *implications for the issue of loneliness?*

- Process of individualization
  - Current elderly experienced these changes at an older age
  - *Nevertheless*:
    - Increasing complexity in partner relationships among the elderly: cohabiting, living apart together, …
    - Changing attitudes → more autonomy (de Jong-Gierveld, 2006)

Increasing diversity

⟶ *implications for the issue of loneliness?*

- Ageing of the population

  - Postponement of widowhood
  - Differentiation: ‘young old’ versus ‘old old’

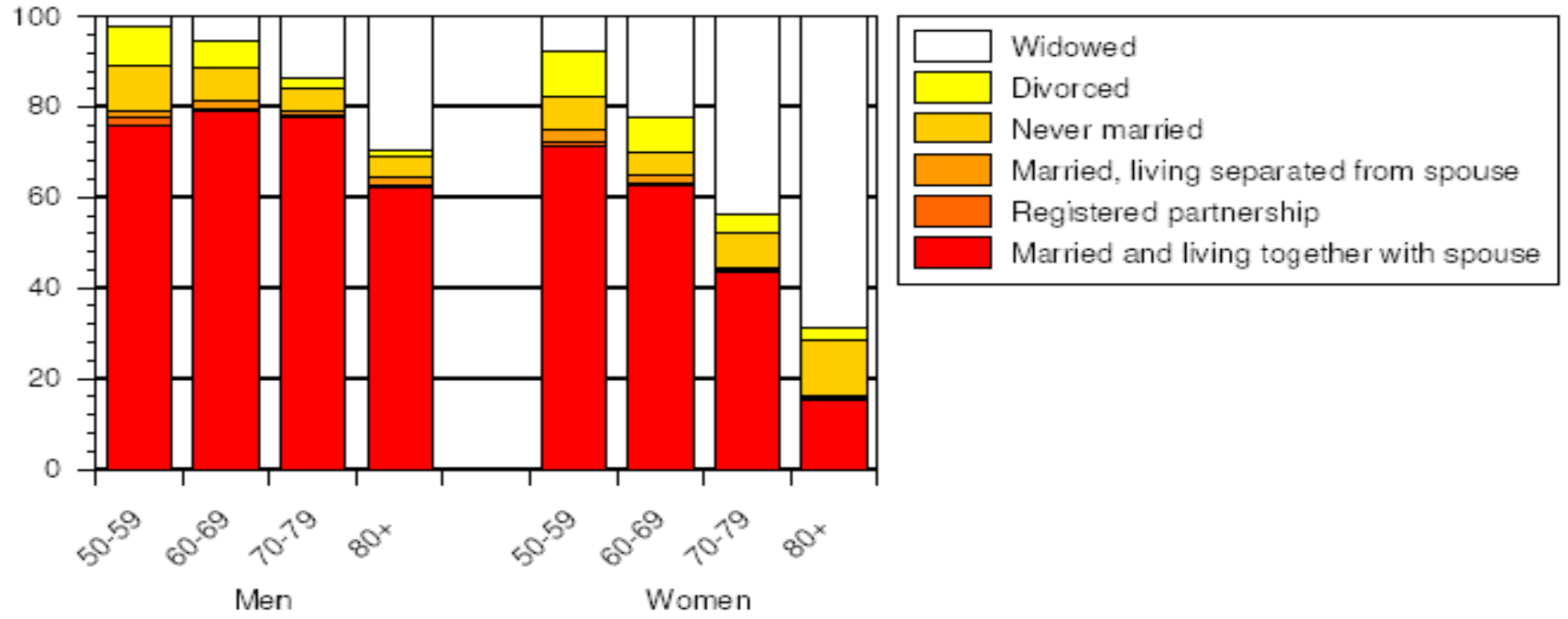
  ►Significant changes in the advanced age

Increasing diversity

⟶ *implications for the issue of loneliness?*

- Increasing differentiation among the elderly

Figure: Marital status in percentage by age and gender at European level



Increasing diversity versus current state of research on loneliness

- Socio-demographic changes
  - Leitmotiv: changes in partner relationships during the life course ⇨ call for a dynamic approach
  - Current state of research:
    - Underscores this dynamic approach: partner history (*life course*)
    - *However*: only the direct effects of the partner history were empirically validated (see Dykstra & de Jong-Gierveld, 2004)
    - The mechanisms which cause loneliness, starting from this life course perspective, were not yet empirically tested

Towards a conceptual model

- *Purpose:* to understand **how** the life course affects loneliness
  - Elaborating a conceptual model starting from this life course perspective which takes into account the challenges caused by the socio-demographic changes on the issue of loneliness

    (*the effect of changes on the macro level on the micro level*)

Towards a conceptual model

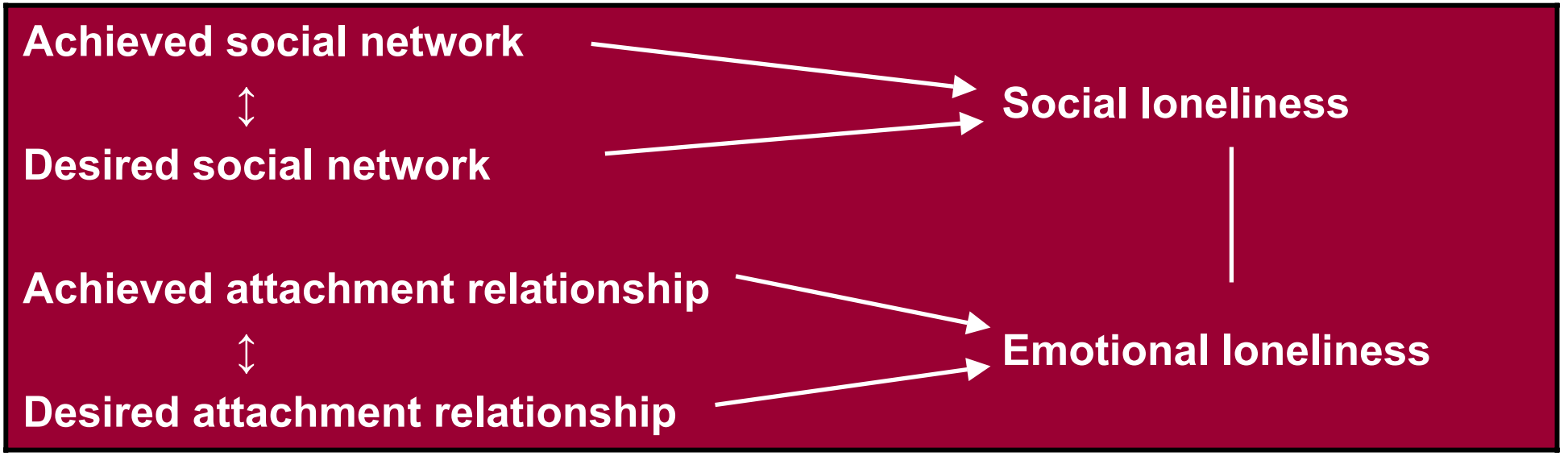
- Starting point: distinction between social and emotional loneliness (Weiss, 1973)
  - Absence attachment figure → emotional loneliness
  - Absence social contacts → social loneliness

- Relevant distinction considering changes
  - e.g. : life event of widowhood
    - Loss of a partner → emotional loneliness ↗
    - Increasing social support → no change in amount of social loneliness

⇨Considers the differentiated impact of crucial life events on loneliness

Towards a conceptual model

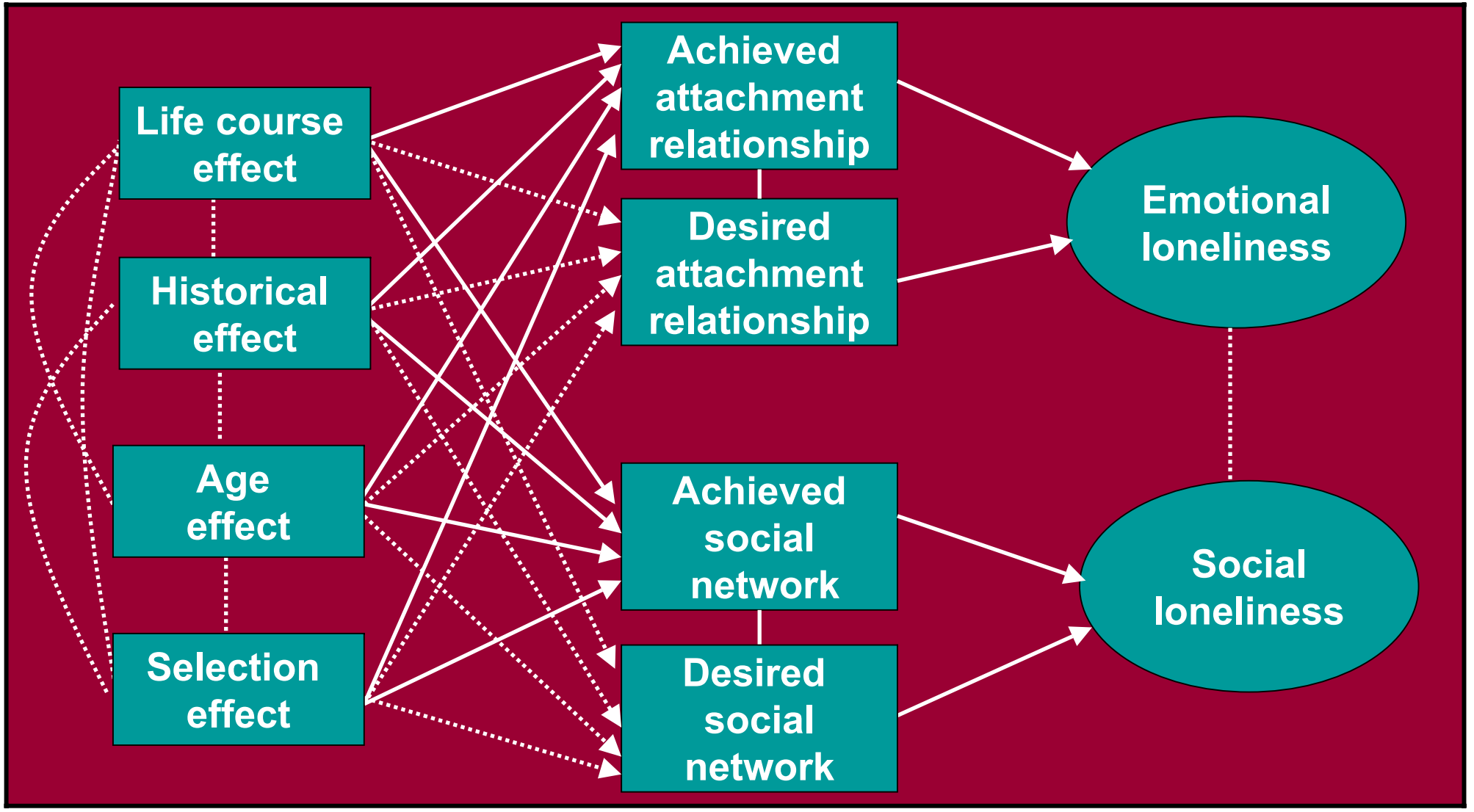
- Cognitive approach:
  - Loneliness = subjective experience, resulting from the discrepancy between the achieved and desired interpersonal relationships (Perlman et al., 1981)



Towards a conceptual model

- Life course perspective
  - Life course theory links the individual life course with the social and historical context and the developmental process (Elder et al., 2003)
  - Relevant concepts:
    - Trajectory
    - Transition
    - Sequence, timing, duration, …
  - *Application*: conceptual distinction (Kalmijn, 2002):
    - Transition / life course effect *(i.e. partner history)*
    - Historical effect
    - Age effect
    - Selection effect

Conceptual model



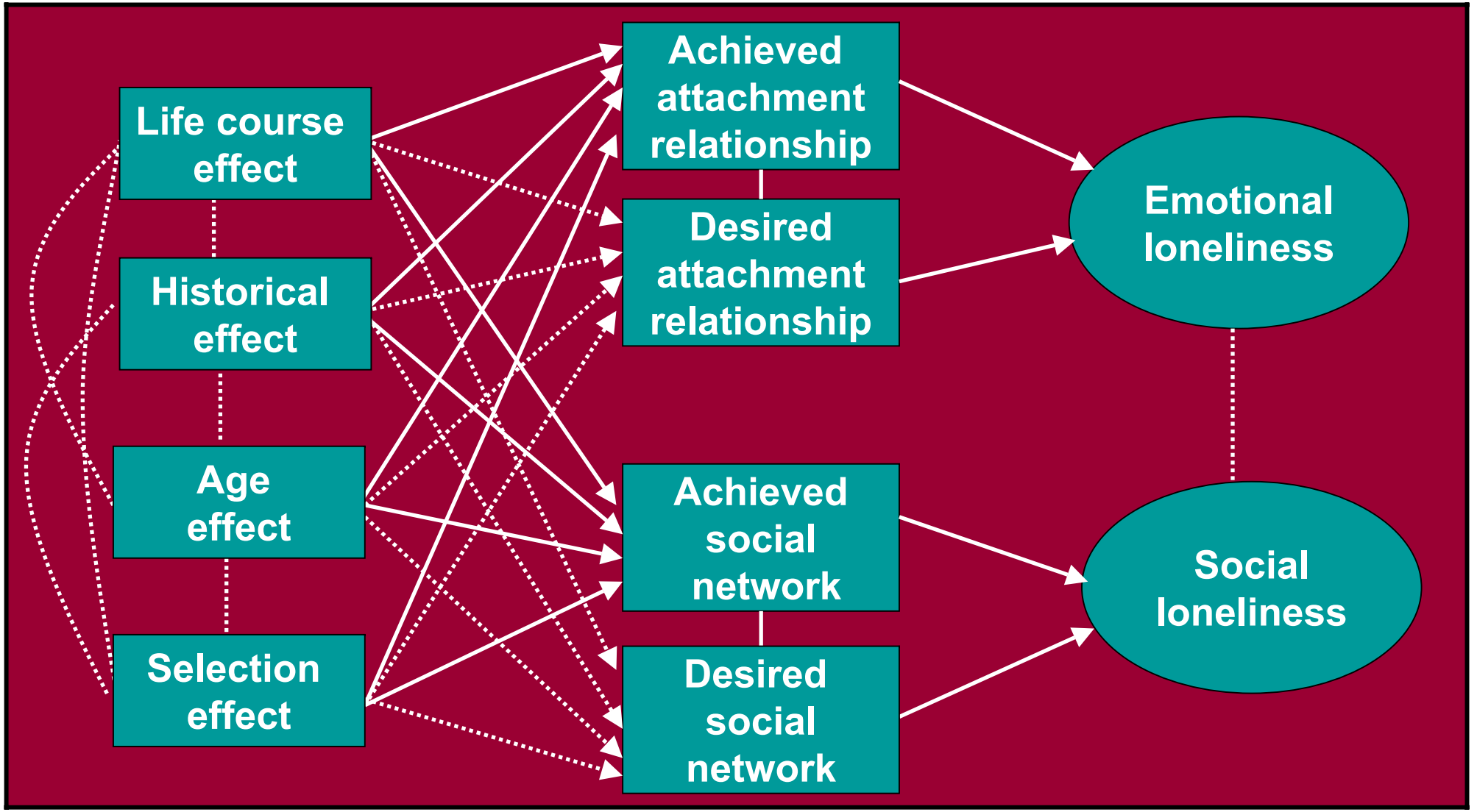
Concluding remarks

- *Purpose:* link the potential impact of changes at the macro level on the specific situation of the elderly, i.e. loneliness among the elderly (micro)

⇨ Conceptual model on loneliness from a life course perspective

  - A framework which counters this increasing diversity
    - Partner history → increasing diversity in partner relationships
    - Age effect → differentiation 'youngest old' – 'oldest old'
    - Including attitudes and expectations → individualization
  - Considers the processes which are at stake
    (e.g. the interaction between age, health and social loneliness)

Discussion


Life course effect
Historical effect
Age effect
Selection effect
Achieved attachment relationship
Desired attachment relationship
Achieved social network
Desired social network
Emotional loneliness
Social loneliness

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Further plans

- Formulate hypotheses within this framework – focus on process

- Empirical validation of the model:
  - Structural equation models
  - Panel Study Belgian Households, wave 9, 2000 (N=1828, 55+)