

THE SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE OF SOLITUDE

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Abstract.—Solitude is a frequently cited motive for visiting parks, forests, and wilderness areas. But while visitors frequently say they achieve their solitude goals, most visit in groups of two or more, suggesting a conception that differs from the classical ideal of being profoundly alone with the universe. Moreover, solitude often can be experienced negatively, surrounded by feelings of loneliness and depression. In this paper, we explore both positive and negative solitude experiences as mental states rather than physical conditions. Results suggest that both states occur frequently, perhaps two or three times per week, and both tended to occur while the person was alone, although this was not a requirement. Both were preceded by a sense of stress, and were likely to occur in environments close to home. Women were more likely to experience solitude at home, while men were more likely to achieve it outdoors.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Time alone is important both to individuals and society. Religious figures from Moses onward have actively sought solitude for meditation and inspiration, and major writers and poets have made solitude a regular part of their creative endeavors (e.g., France 1966, Koch 1994, Storrs 1988). Although many people might be reluctant to rank their own experiences with those of major cultural figures, solitude often plays a significant role in their lives: being alone gives people the chance to work out personal problems, to learn about themselves, or to gain creative or spiritual insights (Westin 1967, Hammitt 2002, Hammitt & Madden 1989).

Today, public parks and recreation areas provide significant solitude opportunities. This is most obviously true of wilderness areas, where solitude is a

long-recognized primary motive for visiting (Hence et al. 1968, 1990). Patterson and Hammitt (1990), for example, found that 54 percent of backpackers in the Great Smoky Mountain National Park felt that solitude was either extremely or very important to their experience, while only 9 percent were neutral or felt it was unimportant. However, although solitude was explicitly cited as a reason for wilderness preservation in the Wilderness Act of 1964 (Shafer & Hammitt 1995), the Act never specified what solitude entails or how it might be experienced (Hammitt & Madden 1989). In offering conceptualizations of solitude to fill this gap, researchers adopted a social-spatial perspective drawn from the privacy, crowding, and normative encounter literatures (e.g., Hammitt et al. 2001, Manning & Valier 2001, Shelby et al. 1996). The closest of these to a direct analysis of solitude as a psychological state is the privacy literature as developed by Hammitt and colleagues (Hammitt 1982, Hammitt & Brown 1984, Hammitt & Madden 1989, Shafer & Hammitt 1995). For example, following Westin's (1967) four function model of privacy, Hammitt and Brown (1984) identified five dimensions of wilderness privacy among student backpackers: emotional release, personal autonomy, reflective thought, limited communication: personal distance, and limited communication: intimacy. Hammitt and Madden (1995) extended the initial study to a survey of 184 Appalachian Trail hikers in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. They identified five factors important in wilderness privacy: tranquility and natural environment, individual cognitive freedom, social cognitive freedom, intimacy, and individualism. From these results Hammitt and Madden concluded that the essence of wilderness privacy involved being in a remote natural environment free of human-generated intrusions, where people had freedom over their own time and actions, as well as control over everyday pressures and attention loads.

But the social dimensions of these results create a conundrum: Most wilderness visitors travel in groups of two or more. For example, of 117 groups of Shenandoah hikers studied by Hall (2001), only 11 percent were alone; the remaining 89 percent came in groups of two or more. Yet, 78 percent of all groups reported having

experienced solitude. Clearly, the social dimension of solitude reported by wilderness visitors differs from what might be termed “classical” solitude like that experienced by Thoreau (1981) or Admiral Byrd (1938), where one is profoundly alone with the universe. While a few wilderness visitors (for example, those described by Krakauer 1996) may seek this classical ideal, wilderness is a social experience for most visitors. The classical state of solitude is more narrowly defined by Hollenhorst and Jones (2001). Drawing on an historical framework derived from classical antiquity and modified by the romantic and transcendental movements, they view solitude as a striving for independence and detachment from social constraints, norms, and expectations. They define solitude as:

... psychological detachment from society for the purpose of cultivating the inner world of the self. It is the act of emotionally isolating oneself for self-discovery, self-realization, meaning, wholeness, and heightened awareness of one’s deepest feelings and impulses. It implies a morality that values the self, at least on occasion, as above the common good (p. 56).

It is this detachment, isolation, and the emphasis on self that we find difficult to reconcile with the social solitude reported by wilderness users who travel in groups of two, three, four, or more. This emphasis on solitude as a mental state offers a somewhat different perspective from that offered by the crowding or normative literatures. If solitude is, in important respects, a mental state or attitude, then it should be possible to attain that state in a range of environments, from public parks to sidewalks and even retail stores. While the absence of others may facilitate both achieving and maintaining solitude, we believe it is not strictly necessary for this state to occur; in many respects, solitude is a personal rather than a place-based concept.

In contrast to Hollenhorst and Jones’ (2001) conception, solitude often is experienced negatively. For example, solitary confinement is considered one of the worst possible punishments, and many unconfined people suffer from loneliness and a sense of isolation when alone—what the poet Baudelaire (1926, p. 61) referred

to as “the dreary solitude of your room.” Or, as Abbey (1990, p. 109) phrased it: “There are times when solitaire becomes solitary, an entirely different game, and the inside of the skull as confining and unbearable as the interior of the house trailer on a hot day.” According to a recent reanalysis of market research data (Fetto 2003), 12 percent of Americans spend Friday night alone and they are 1.5 times more likely to say they feel “very alone in the world” than are those who spend Friday night with others. They spend their evening watching TV or a video, sleeping, eating, reading a book, surfing the Web, doing housework or other work, or listening to the radio. Women are twice as likely as men to read, while men are twice as likely as women to spend time catching up on work. Because feelings of social isolation can drastically impact psychological functioning and quality of life, much psychological research has been aimed at mitigating negative consequences of solitude (see Ernst & Cacioppo 1999, for a review).

Solitude, then, can be a joyous state linked deeply to creativity and spirituality, or it can be negative and problematic. In this paper, we summarize the results of a descriptive, exploratory study of the subjective state of solitude, designed to identify its varieties, the frequency and durations with which they occurred, events preceding a solitude episode, what people did during it, and the outcomes they obtained from it. We also explore gender differences in solitude experiences.

2.0 METHODS

Since we considered solitude to be a subjective mental state attainable in a wide variety of activities and environments, our approach to its study differed substantially from those employed in previous studies. We began with a pilot study in which undergraduate student volunteers from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst were asked to write a brief, detailed essay about either a positive or negative solitude experience that they had experienced within the past year. The experience was to have lasted for at least an hour, but not more than three days, nor was it confined to any particular activity. Experiences reported both in the pilot main studies, varied widely. For example, some study participants sought natural areas, but others went shopping or took long baths. One even reported driving to Florida, while

another simply lay on the bed and cried. What these diverse activities shared in common was that those reporting them felt profoundly alone. Consequently, the questions we asked dealt with exploring and describing this subjective mental state: When and where did it occur? How long did it last? What events/feelings precipitated it? What did people do and feel during it? And, what outcomes occurred as a result of it?

In the primary study, 206 student volunteers (median age = 20, range 18 to 48) at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst were randomly assigned to one of two groups in which they used questionnaires to describe either a positive solitude experience (n = 105, 76% female) or a negative experience (n= 101, 73% female). The initial parts of both questionnaire versions were the same, asking participants to describe two episodes of solitude that they had experienced in the past year--one positive and one negative. Positive experiences were defined as having been generally worthwhile, although some aspects may have been painful at the time. The negative experience was to have been neither beneficial nor pleasant, but did not have to be entirely negative. Each experience was to have lasted more than an hour but less than three days. Then, depending on the version, the next 30 items focused on either the positive or negative experience using: (a) a series of questions about when and where the experience occurred, others present, and duration, (b) a 7-point scale that assessed participants' overall evaluation of the experience before, during, and after the episode; (c) checklists of specific thoughts, feelings, and actions related to the experience; and (d) open-ended items that provided additional detail about the experience. Both the scale and checklist items were derived from the pilot data supplemented with standardized descriptions of emotions drawn from other emotion research (see Lewis & Haviland-Jones 2000). The final portion of the questionnaire described participants' general conceptions of solitude, plus demographic data, and was the same for all participants. The data were analyzed using t-tests and binary correlation coefficients for dichotomous variables.

3.0 RESULTS

3.1 Frequency and Duration

Solitude is a common experience: over half of the study participants (57%) indicated they experienced

solitude at least once a week, and the modal response (40 participants out of 206) was two or three times per week. Participants estimated (in retrospect) that half the episodes they had experienced in the past year were positive and half were negative. Most respondents were alone when the experience occurred (67% for the positive group and 68% for the negative group, difference not statistically significant). However, the remainder reported experiences where they "felt alone," such as eating alone in a crowded restaurant, or shopping alone in a crowded mall. Positive episodes were more likely to occur during the day (51% vs. 35% $p < 0.01$), while negative episodes tended to occur at night. Seventy percent of the episodes lasted between 4 and 16 hours.

3.2 Settings

Although both positive and negative episodes occurred in a variety of settings, the most common location for both was at home (or in one's room) (Table 1); 78 percent of the negative episodes described occurred at home, while only 46 percent of the positive episodes did. However, positive episodes were significantly more likely than negative episodes to have occurred in a non-home location (54% vs. 72%, $p < 0.1$). For example, positive episodes were significantly more likely than negative episodes to have occurred outdoors in a natural setting like a forest or beach (32% versus 3%, $p < 0.01$). Participants described positive episodes as occurring in comfortable, relaxing places where they felt free of responsibility. Negative episodes, by contrast, were described as occurring in locations that were dull or boring, and where they had considerably less control.

3.3 Before, During, and After the Episode

Typically, both positive and negative episodes of solitude were preceded by a sense of stress associated with job or school difficulties, questioning priorities, thinking about the past, and feeling stressed or frustrated (Table 2). However, those describing positive experiences tended to be in a positive mood before the episode, experiencing feelings of freedom, happiness, and independence, while negative episodes were often preceded by feelings of depression, sadness, and uncertainty. Those describing positive episodes also said they felt extremely busy with little time to be alone (62%) and were actively seeking solitude (64%) when the episode occurred.

Table 1.—Solitude settings

Setting	Experience Type		
	Positive (n = 105)	Negative (n = 101)	Total (n = 206)
	----- Percent -----		
At home/in room	46	78	63
Outdoors in a natural setting	32	3	17
Outdoors in an urban setting	9	7	8
Indoors in a space lacking personal meaning (e.g., classroom, office)	6	10	8
Outdoors in a landscaped setting	6	1	3
At a place with spiritual significance (e.g., church, cemetery)	1	0	0
Totals:	100	99	99

Table 2.—Feeling/activities preceding the solitude episode^a

Feeling/activity	Positive Episode	Negative Episode
	--- Percent of Participants ---	
School/job difficulties	54	51
Questioning goals or priorities	52	50
Thinking about the past	49	50
Stressed	47	52
Frustrated	34	48
Actively seeking solitude	64	29*
Extremely busy, without time to be alone	62	31*
Free	45	4*
Happy	45	13*
Independent	44	13*
Content	41	10*
Good relationship with significant other	41	15*
In control	39	10*
Doing well in school or on the job	39	19*
Depressed	23	57*
Sad	27	56*
Uncertain or confused	38	53*
Worried or anxious	37	52*
Angry	13	40*
Everyone left and I was alone	19	39*
Difficulties with significant other	24	39*
Conflict with friend, co-worker, or family	23	36*
Scared	16	34*

^a Participants could endorse as many feelings/activities as were applicable.

* The difference between positive episodes and negative episodes is significant, $p < 0.01$.

During both kinds of episodes, a majority of participants spent time contemplating personal issues, questioning priorities, and hoping for things (Table 3). However, those experiencing negative solitude reported spending significantly more time in diversionary activities like watching television, reading, or surfing the Web. They

described the episode as involving sadness (77%), loneliness (68%), and depression (67%), and experienced a sense of anxiety (55%), confusion (55%), and isolation (54%) during it. They also said they tended to feel stressed or tense (52%) and afraid (51%). By contrast, those describing positive episodes, characterized them as

Table 3.—Feeling/activities that occurred during the solitude episode^a

Feeling/activity	Positive Epi-	Negative
	sode	Episode
	----- Percent -----	
Contemplating personal issues/decisions	58	63
Thinking about people or events from the past	54	53
Hoping/wishing for things	49	58
Happiness/contentment	79	1*
Daydreaming, fantasizing, letting one's mind wander	76	41*
Feeling free from social pressure	74	20*
Relaxation/calmness	73	3*
Freedom	67	5*
Optimism/hope	57	7*
Increased concentration	57	7*
Collecting and organizing thoughts	56	27*
Listening to music	52	35*
Joyful	54	1*
Self-confident	50	3*
Harmony (or unity) with nature	41	1*
Heightened sense of awareness or vivid imagery	40	10*
Feeling the adventure or meeting a challenge	34	6*
Sadness	20	77*
Loneliness	12	68*
Depression	16	67*
Missed someone to share thoughts with	14	62*
Emptiness	13	56*
Anxious or worried	17	55*
Confused	21	55*
Isolated	9	54*
Stressed/tense	19	52*
Afraid	14	51*
Oppressed by aloneness or silence	2	44*
Missing the comfort or predictability of a normal routine	2	41*
Coping with loss or coming to terms with change	19	40*
Difficulties concentrating or focusing	4	34*
Watching TV or movies	20	34*

^a Multiple endorsements were possible.

* The difference between positive episodes and negative episodes is significant, $p < 0.01$.

times of happiness, relaxation, freedom, and optimism, as opposed to times of feeling sadness, loneliness, and emptiness. They spent time daydreaming or fantasizing (76%), collecting their thoughts (56%), and listening to music (52%). They also reported an increased ability to concentrate.

Study participants also addressed the outcomes of the episodes (Table 4). Those experiencing positive episodes were more likely to rate them as beneficial than those experiencing negative episodes. However, the groups

did not differ significantly in the amount they said they learned from the episode. Many said they had gained new perspectives on a problem (44% for positive, 37% for negative) and were stronger as a result (40% positive, 30% negative). The major benefits of positive solitude were goal clarification (70%), increased self-understanding (58%), and a sense of self-renewal (55%). While nearly a third of respondents describing negative episodes reported increased clarification and understanding, they also believed that they overanalyzed problems without reaching a solution (55%), focused on

Table 4.—Outcomes of solitude episodes^a

Outcome	Positive Episode	Negative Episode
	----- Percent -----	
Gained insight or new perspective on a problem	44	37
Became a stronger, more resilient person	40	30
Clarification of goals and priorities	70	32
Noticed no detrimental effects of solitude	66	9*
Increased understanding of oneself	58	33*
Self-renewal	55	13*
Over-analyzing problems, becoming uncertain	16	55*
Focusing on negative things that can't be changed	8	52*
Feeling drained or tired	11	51*

^a Multiple endorsements were possible. Difference between positive and negative episodes is significant, $p < 0.01$

things that could not be changed (52%), and found the experience tiring and draining (51%).

3.4 Gender Differences

We hypothesized that the experience of solitude was likely to be influenced by gender. However, there were no statistically significant differences between women and men in the frequency and duration of solitude experiences. Across both positive and negative experiences, women were more likely than men to have felt sad ($p < 0.05$) or stressed ($p < 0.05$) prior to the experiences. As compared to men, their solitude experiences occurred more frequently at home (or in their room) ($p < 0.05$), where they had a tendency to listen to music ($p < 0.01$). By contrast, men tended to feel more independent than women prior to the experience ($p < 0.05$). Their experiences tended to occur outdoors ($p < 0.01$), in a beautiful place with wind, water, and trees around ($p < 0.01$) where they felt at peace with nature ($p < 0.01$). Men also were more likely than women to have experienced solitude in a spiritual setting ($p < 0.05$) and to report a spiritual experience ($p < 0.05$).

Gender differences for both positive and negative experiences are consistent with these findings. For positive experiences, women were more likely than men to have felt stressed ($p < 0.05$) and anxious ($p < 0.05$) prior to the episode. Men were more likely than women to say that they had been thinking about spiritual or religious issues prior to the episode ($p < 0.05$), and to have had the episode occur outdoors ($p < 0.05$) where they felt at peace with nature ($p < 0.05$). For negative episodes, women were

more likely than men to have been at home or in their room ($p < 0.05$) or in a new/unfamiliar place ($p < 0.05$), and were more likely to say that feeling afraid was central to their experience ($p < 0.05$). Men, by contrast, were more likely than women to have been outdoors ($p < 0.05$) in a beautiful place ($p < 0.05$).

4.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

These results require a substantial caveat: study participants were undergraduate students with a median age of 20 and were primarily (75%) women. Although they may be well equipped to articulate their feelings and experiences, as students they may have limited experience in dealing with the challenges presented by solitude. Moreover, the campus setting in which most respondents lived is dense and highly social, suggesting that our results may underestimate the extent of negative solitude in the general population. Despite these limitations, we believe the data offer implications for both research and for park and recreation management agencies.

Solitude is a frequently occurring, complex, multifaceted mental state that can be either positive or negative depending on situational determinants. As a mental state, it can be compared to flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) in that it can be attained in a variety of activities and environments; with both solitude and flow, an external observer would see only an individual engaged in some particular activity with no indication of their mental state. In flow, however, the sense of self is submerged: the person is totally immersed in the demands of the immediate activity. In solitude, by contrast, the sense

of self--and its isolation from others--is acutely present. Our data suggest that the physical absence of others can facilitate a sense of solitude, but is not strictly necessary for it to occur.

For positive solitude, the “classical” ideal is that of reflective thought—a state of disinterested contemplation of any of a wide range of topics (Westin 1967, Hammitt 1982, Kaplan & Kaplan 1989). This ideal of classical solitude is perhaps best captured by the spirit of Wordsworth’s poem “Daffodils”: “I wandered lonely as a cloud ...” It is evident that many study participants describing positive solitude experiences achieved this state, using their time in solitude to contemplate a diverse range of personal issues.

As noted above, many studies of outdoor recreation and wilderness users report that solitude is often a primary motive for visitation, and the encounter literature suggests that solitude is an important factor in the quality of their experience. However, classical solitude/reflective thought seems somewhat unlikely to occur in a group setting and there is substantial research to show that, with the possible exception of activities like hunting and fishing, outdoor recreation is profoundly social, generally occurring in small groups of family and/or friends. It is difficult (although not impossible) to imagine classical solitude occurring often in such circumstances.

This raises a broader question about the extent to which privacy and solitude can be equated. Westin (1967) suggests that solitude is a subcategory of privacy. Yet privacy seems to be a somewhat objective state with legalistic overtones, while solitude is completely subjective: It is possible, for example, for someone to invade your privacy without your knowledge, but it would be impossible to have your solitude so invaded. Future research should consider separating the concepts, focusing on Hammitt and Madden’s (1989) emphasis on privacy as intimacy, as distinct from solitude.

The ideal of classical solitude also raises gender issues. As noted, women were more likely to have experienced solitude at home or in their rooms, while men were more likely to have been outdoors. This finding probably reflects women’s concerns about safety; many women

may prefer to seek solitude in private spaces such as the home or in well frequented public spaces where they can feel alone while still being visible to many others. In this respect, vegetative management to enhance visibility in urban parks may be helpful (e.g., Schroeder 1986). Another strategy that some women adopt is to visit natural areas with a dog. It is interesting (but well beyond the scope of this paper) to speculate if the ideal of classical solitude is attainable in the company of animals. Clearly, gender differences in solitude experiences deserve greater exploration in future research.

Another area deserving exploration is the potential relationship between solitude and leisure. The emphasis placed by our student participants on being either at home or outdoors suggests that both positive and negative solitude experiences tend to occur during leisure. It seems likely that the same would be true for working adults, since, for most of us, the workplace is a highly structured, social environment. Although it is possible to feel alone and isolated while at work, the relationship between solitude and leisure deserves further exploration.

Also worthy of additional exploration is the social context of solitude experiences. Although it may seem incongruous, solitude is, by nature, a social phenomenon that needs to be understood within the broader context of society (i.e., what people are seeking solitude from), and there may well be cross-cultural differences in solitude experiences.

The frequency of solitude experiences and their tendency to occur at home suggests a link to local environments. Moreover, the distinct sub-emphasis on natural environments and aesthetics may prove to be an important justification for the preservation of urban open space. Hammitt (2002) has recently extended his privacy work in this direction: In a survey of Cleveland Metropark users, he found that 67 percent of his respondents came either alone or with one other person. Their visits lasted from 20 minutes to a maximum of 9 hours ($\bar{\chi} = 2$ hours, 12 minutes) and they engaged in walking (34%), picnicking (10%), biking (8%), jogging/running (7%), and swimming (7%). Respondents indicated that they had been able to achieve their desired degree of privacy, and they rated reflective thought as the

most important of the privacy functions they achieved. Although our focus was on the subjective aspects of solitude rather than privacy, we believe our results to be consonant with Hammitt's findings. Both studies suggest that local areas play an important role in providing settings for solitude.

There also may be a link between social class and solitude in the broader population. Wealthy people may have large homes with private yards, while low-income families may live in much more crowded conditions, making them dependent on public space to fulfill solitude/privacy needs. As Taylor (1999) points out, the working class in the 19th century often used public space for activities like lovemaking and drinking that they could not do in their crowded homes, and there is little reason to suppose that such dependence does not exist today.

Negative solitude—an intense feeling of isolation often accompanied by sadness, anxiety, or depression—also is a common leisure experience. Negative episodes appear to be precipitated by a sense of stress and a questioning of priorities. When caught in such a state, our student participants tried to divert themselves by watching television, reading, or surfing the Web. In the broader community, people may differ in the resources—both internal and material—that they can bring to bear on such problem states. Those particularly likely to suffer from negative solitude include the elderly who live alone, poor rural women (e.g., Giesen 1995), and newcomers. Local parks and recreation agencies may have a role to play in alleviating such stress through the provision of community centers and other social outreach programs. Again, Abbey (1990, pp. 110, 111) summarizes well:

For there are the bad moments, or were, when I would sit down at the table for supper inside the house trailer and discover with a sudden shock that I was alone. There was nobody, nobody at all, on the other side of the table. Aloneness became loneliness, and the sensation was strong enough to remind me (how could I have forgotten?) that the one thing better than solitude, the only thing better than solitude, is society.

Unfortunately, our data suggest these negative episodes occur most frequently at night, when many community social resources may not be available. Further research is needed to confirm these effects.

In conclusion, both positive and negative solitude experiences are common, often occurring as frequently as two or three times per week. Both are precipitated by a sense of stress and usually, although not always, occur when a person is alone. The frequency and duration of both suggest the importance of local environments close to home. Women, in particular, were more likely to achieve solitude at home, while men were more likely to experience solitude in an outdoor, natural setting. Further research should extend the examination of solitude experiences between solitude, gender and social class. Finally, researchers need to clarify the relationship between classical solitude/reflective thought and the social character of many outdoor recreation activities.

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