

## SOLITUDE, NATURE, AND CITIES

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**Abstract:** Solitude is an important motive for participation in many leisure activities. This paper reviews the evidence about the psychology of solitude experiences obtained from two studies conducted with University of Massachusetts students. The first study identified three independent dimensions of solitude: inner-directed, outer-directed, and loneliness. The second study, which differentiated between positive (inner-/outer-directed) and negative (loneliness) solitude, found that episodes of both kinds were common: 2 to 3 times per week, typically lasting from 4 to 16 hours. Positive episodes tended to occur during the day, while negative episodes occurred at night. The implications for various park and recreation agencies are explored.

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### Introduction

Humans are a naturally social species; we live, work, and play together in small groups, communities, and even large cities. The density of these communal groupings will likely increase in the future as the U.S. population is expected to double by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau 2003). However, the very density of urban living can produce serious pathologies (e.g., Milgram 1968) and even the most social of us may desire time by himself or herself to be alone to reduce the level of social interaction. At the other end of the spectrum, loneliness is a persistent by-product of urban life and creates its own unique problems (Ernst & Cacioppo 1999). Solitude—the state of being alone—is thus something of a conundrum: it can be among the most sublime of human experiences, and among the most terrifying.

Throughout history, solitude has been linked with both creativity and spirituality. Artists, composers, writers, and poets have all made solitude part of their creative regime, while major religious figures—Jesus, Mohammad, and the Buddha—all spent long periods in the wilderness (Storr 1988). Indeed, solitude is recognized as an important motive for wilderness visits even today, and the Wilderness Act of 1964 provided a legal basis for wilderness preservation in order to preserve solitude (Shafer & Hammitt 1995). Yet no attempt was made to specify exactly what solitude is or what might be entailed in its experience (Hammitt & Madden 1989). Often, the research literature relates solitude to privacy, or defines it negatively in the sense that it is treated simply as the absence of other people. In this paper, by contrast, we view solitude as a psychological state, much like Hollenhorst and Jones (2001) who define solitude as psychological detachment from society in order to cultivate the inner word of the self and experience self-discovery, self-realization, meaning, wholeness, and an enhanced awareness of one's deepest feelings and impulses.

Such a definition, however, can apply only to positive solitude. Solitude, particularly in the form of loneliness, can be a terrifying state, and solitary confinement is one of the worst punishments that society can confer. According to a recent reanalysis of market research data (Fetto 2003), 12% 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.

Results such as these suggest that loneliness is a serious problem for many people. Not surprisingly, therefore, much contemporary psychological research has treated solitude as problematic and focused on ways to alleviate its negative effects (see review by Ernst & Cacioppo 1999).

It is clear, then, that solitude 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 two preliminary studies of

**Table 1. — Solitude Concepts**

Concept	Definition
Self-discovery	Focusing attention on yourself gives insight into fundamental values and goals, personal strengths and weaknesses
Anonymity	When alone, you can act however you feel without concern for what others think.
Inner peace	While alone you feel calm, relaxed, and free from everyday pressures.
Creativity	Being alone helps stimulate novel ideas or innovative expression.
Problem solving	Aloneness allows thinking about problems or decisions you face, and you attempt resolution
Intimacy	Although alone, you feel close to someone you care about (absent friend, lover, deceased relative, etc.); the person's absence only strengthens your feeling of closeness.
Spirituality	While alone, you have a mystic-like experience (i.e., transcending everyday concerns, being part of a greater whole) which can be interpreted religiously (close to God) or secularly (part of the natural order).
Loneliness	You feel self-conscious, anxious, or depressed, longing for interpersonal contact.
Diversion	You fill time alone by watching television, reading, surfing the Internet, or engaging in other distracting activities.

solitude designed to identify the varieties of solitude, the frequencies and durations with which they occurred, and events preceding an episode, the activities people engaged in during it, and the outcomes they obtained from it. Full details of these studies and the statistical analysis that support them can be found in Long (2000), Long et al. (2003a) and Long et al. (2003b). After describing study methods and results, we suggest a variety of policy implications, particularly for municipal park and recreation programs.

### Methods

Our analysis of solitude draws upon two studies, both conducted using undergraduate student volunteers from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. In the first (Long et al. 2003a), 320 students (80% female; median age = 20, range 18 to 56) received a questionnaire that described nine different types of solitude abstracted from previous studies. These included solitude as anonymity, as creativity, as diversion, as inner peace, as intimacy, as loneliness, as problem-solving, as self-discovery, and as spirituality (see Table 1). Using Likert-type scales, participants rated each type on the frequency with which they experienced it, the effort they were willing to extend to experience it, and the extent of its influence on their lives. A variety of personality measures also were employed to assess individual differences in the capacity for, or predisposition to, solitude. The questionnaire presented the types of solitude in three randomly assigned orders to guard against order effects.

In the second study (Long et al. 2003b), 206 student volunteers (median age = 20, range 18 to 48) completed a 51-item solitude questionnaire in

which they described 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) 7-point scales that assessed participants' overall evaluation of the experience before, during, and after the episode; (b) checklists of specific thoughts, feelings, and actions related to the experience; and (c) open-ended items that provided additional detail about the experience. 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.

### Results

#### *Study One*

The respondents in the first study identified problem solving, inner peace, and self-discovery as the three most important types of solitude, and ranked them second, third, and fourth in terms of frequency of experience, although even spiritual episodes were fairly common, occurring almost once a month (n = 3.52). The most common

**Table 2. — Location of Solitude Episode**

Solitude Type	Setting (% experienced)		
	Home	Public Place (Mall, museum, etc.)	Natural Setting
Inner-Directed Positive:			
Self-discovery	62	12	26
Anonymity	83	13	5
Inner peace	53	6	42
Creativity	61	19	20
Problem solving	72	11	18
Outer-Directed Positive:			
Intimacy	70	13	17
Spirituality	23	10	67
Negative:			
Loneliness	70	28	2
Diversion	95	4	1

place for all kinds of solitude episodes to occur was at home (including dorm or apartment) (Table 2). The exception to this was spirituality which, when it did occur, was far more likely to have occurred in a natural setting (woods, park, beach, mountains, etc.) than at home (67% vs. 23%). However, many participants also identified natural environments as important in the experience of inner peace (42%), self-discovery (26%), and creativity (20%). Loneliness (28%) and creativity (19%) were the only solitude experiences judged likely to occur in public places like malls, museums, libraries, coffee shops, etc.

We subjected the varieties of solitude to a factor analysis based on their mean ratings of importance, a scale derived from combining the influence and effort scales (how much influence has this type of solitude had on your life; how much effort would you be willing to exert to have such an experience). The factor analysis identified three general types of solitude: inner-directed, outer-directed, and loneliness. The details of the analysis are presented in Long et al. 2003.

Inner-directed solitude is characterized by self-discovery, inner peace, and anonymity (freedom from social constraints). It also was associated with creativity and problem solving. By contrast, outer-directed solitude includes intimacy and spirituality, both of which suggest connections to others not specifically present. These could include other people, nature, or God (however conceived). The final factor—loneliness—proved to be independent of, rather than opposite to, the first two factors.

Thus it is possible to be both lonely (or not lonely), creative, and spiritual all at the same time, as opposed to one set of feelings dominating or suppressing the others.

### *Study Two*

Solitude, in all its varieties, is a common experience: Most respondents (57%) reported a solitude experience once or more a week, with the modal response being two or three times per week. Respondents estimated (retrospectively) that half their solitude episodes over the past year had been positive and half negative. Although it is not essential to be alone to experience solitude, most respondents reported that they had been, both for positive (67%) and negative (68%) experiences. Those not actually alone reported settings that “felt” alone—eating alone in a restaurant, etc. Seventy percent said that the episode had lasted from 4 to 16 hours. Positive episodes were more likely than negative episodes to occur during the day, outdoors in a natural setting that could be beautiful or awe-inspiring, and in comfortable, relaxing places where respondents felt free of responsibility. Negative episodes, by contrast, were more likely to occur at night, at home (or in one’s room), and in dull or boring places. Those describing negative episodes also felt they had considerably less control over their situations than did those who described positive episodes.

Typically, both positive and negative episodes of solitude were preceded by a sense of stress associated with job or school difficulties, questioning priorities, and thinking about the past. However, those who described 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.

During both kinds of episodes, a majority of respondents spent time contemplating personal issues and questioning priorities. However, those experiencing negative solitude reported spending significantly more time in diversionary activities like watching television, reading, or surfing the internet. They were more likely to consider the

episode boring, lonely, and anxious. Those describing positive episodes, characterized them as times of happiness, relaxation, freedom, and optimism, as opposed to feelings of sadness, loneliness, and emptiness.

Respondents also assessed the outcomes of the episodes. Those experiencing positive episodes were more likely to rate them as being 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 episodes, 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. 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 things that couldn't be changed (52%), and found the experience to be tiring and draining (51%).

## Discussion

Solitude is a complex, multifaceted state. Although often equated in the research literature with privacy, or conceptualized as the simple absence of other people, the data from these two studies suggest it is better conceived of as a psychological state that, while usually occurring in the absence of immediate others, can also occur in diverse, and sometimes even crowded settings.

Perhaps the most important of the above findings are the frequency (2 to 3 times per week) and duration of solitude episodes. These findings suggest that solitude in both positive and negative forms, is primarily a local problem and that municipal parks and recreation agencies may play key roles in the provision of positive solitude opportunities and even in the alleviation of negative solitude states. While most positive solitude episodes tended to occur at home, it is evident that natural environments can be significant facilitators of positive solitude.

Seeking solitude is a long-standing, well recognized motive for wilderness visits (Dawson, Newman, and Watson 1997; Hendee et al. 1968).

Obviously, wilderness visitors anticipate a positive experience. However, our research suggests that the two types of positive solitude—inner-directed and outer-directed—may represent different kinds of motives that may engender different kinds of behavior. For many, wilderness use is a social experience that typically occurs in small groups of two, three, or four. The “solitude” these people seek clearly is outer-directed: to be alone in the wilderness with highly significant others. On the other hand, there are still some who enter the wilderness alone, perhaps in search of the contemplation associated with our inner-directed solitude. Krakauer (1996) writes movingly of some of these people; often, those he describes seem idealistic, a bit dreamy and ethereal, perhaps better in touch with their own internal reality than with the external world, with potentially disastrous consequences. Krakauer's account was not a scientific study, however, and the people he describes are not necessarily representative of those seeking inner-directed solitude. In fact, our preliminary results can only suggest the need for further documentation with representative samples that examine differences in actual behavior in addition to motives.

Wilderness aside, our results suggest that municipal parks and programs also may play a significant role in providing solitude opportunities. In particular, the frequency of solitude episodes (2 to 3 times per week) and their duration (4 to 16 hours) suggest that solitude is a common experience that occurs in the places where people lead their daily lives. While most episodes reported occurred indoors, a significant minority emphasized nature or natural environments.

In local communities, these may be most readily available through landscape-type public parks (as opposed to parks that emphasize athletic facilities). It is a common experience to want a break during or after a period of high stress work, and local parks offer one potential alternative. Our results are only suggestive, of course, and require further empirical verification, but it may be possible to link solitude with park design features. For example, More (1985) suggests that the intrusion of surrounding streets can be minimized through careful park design.

Future research also should examine potential links between solitude and social class. Wealthy people

can afford to purchase large, multi-room homes with yards that permit temporary escape to achieve some degree of solitude. As one descends the economic ladder, however, living densities increase and the availability of alternative “private” space decreases. Consequently, public space may play a significant role in providing solitude opportunities for low-income people. In fact, there is ample historical evidence that suggests that urban parks have traditionally fulfilled this role (Taylor 1999).

Public parks and programs also may have a role to play in alleviating negative solitude—loneliness. Specific groups that suffer from loneliness—shut-ins, newcomers to a community, the elderly—are well known and are served by a variety of municipal programs. Senior centers and recreation activity programs are designed to stimulate interaction among these groups. Parks, too, may serve as social nodes. In fact, Whyte (1991) argues that the best urban parks are designed like a series of rooms, so in some parks it should be possible to accommodate both opportunities for positive solitude and social nodes. The difficulty is that our respondents often described negative episodes as occurring at night, making both gender and budgets constraining factors.

We advocate treating our results cautiously—as suggestions for further consideration and empirical verification rather than as established fact. For example, we relied on the self-reports of student volunteers; students tend to live very social lives in a high-density situation. Clearly, there is a need for representative samples of different kinds of people living in various circumstances before we can begin to make definitive statements about solitude. In the meantime, however, our results do suggest that solitude is a common experience that can be either positive or very problematic, and which is attained in a wide range of environments.

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