

An Exercise to Teach the Psychological Benefits of Solitude: The Date with the Self

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Solitude – time spent by oneself – is a common human experience, though its possible benefits may not be appreciated by many. In a pretest-posttest quasi-experimental evaluation of an exercise designed to teach the psychological benefits of solitude, 54 undergraduate students went on a date with the self, i.e., planning and deliberately spending an afternoon or evening by oneself engaged in personally chosen leisure activity. Results showed that the date with the self produced significant gains in appreciation of time spent alone, relative to a comparison group of 49 students. Of the features of solitude, anonymity and low levels of negative affect during the exercise accounted for increased appreciation for time spent alone, while feelings of inner peace, low levels of loneliness, and previous attitudes toward solitude were related to overall enjoyment of the activity.

Solitude, time alone, preference for solitude, loneliness, well-being

Solitude – spending time by oneself – is a ubiquitous psychological experience. Though social animals, humans engage in numerous activities in everyday life accompanied by no one else but themselves. Taking a late bus ride home in the evening, reading a book in bed on a lazy Sunday afternoon, even mundane things like quietly writing a to-do list on one's desk or spending a few extra minutes in the shower – all these are exemplars of solitude experiences. Research using the Experience Sampling Method (ESM), in which participants were given beeper devices and contacted at random points during the day and asked to note their current activity and location, has estimated that approximately 29% of human waking hours are spent alone (Larson, 1990).

Solitude is linked to other related, but distinct, constructs. These include isolation—the total absence of social company, and loneliness—the negative emotional state of dissatisfaction with the quantity and quality of one's

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social relations (Burger, 2010; Leary, Herbst & McCrary, 2003). Isolation is an objective state, unlike solitude and loneliness, which are largely subjective experiences. One can be isolated but feel perfectly content; at the same time, a person can be in a crowd and still feel lonely. Solitude and loneliness, in contrast, can be distinguished by their different affective valences and by a cognitive feature: during solitude moments, we have little or no expectation of higher levels of social interaction. That is, being by – or indeed, *being with* – ourselves is fine and simply enough. Loneliness, on the other hand, involves a longing to correct a discrepancy between a person's ideal and actual levels of social interaction (Russell, 1996).

Solitude and Psychological Well-being

While loneliness has received much research attention because of its links with negative psychological functioning and its pervasiveness across time and culture (Ayalon & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2010; Rokach, 2004; Russell, 1996), solitude has been relatively less explored by scholars and clinicians, with a few exceptions. Solitude has been cited by a handful of psychologists studying subjective well-being. The humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow (1970); Sumerlin & Bundrick, 1996) proposed that the capacity to appreciate solitude was one of the defining characteristics of self-actualized individuals. Researchers in the positive psychology tradition such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1992) have argued that solitary skills (the ability to handle isolation and enjoy solitude), not just social skills, are important for happiness, stress management, and flow (see also Byrnes, 1983; Delle Fave, Massimini, & Bassi, 2011; Larson & Lee, 1996; Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982). Indeed, solitude has been described by one clinical scholar as a “return to the self” (Storr, 1988).

Solitude theorists have proposed a number of benefits related to time spent alone: freedom, creativity, intimacy, and spirituality (Long & Averill, 2003). First, being by oneself may provide freedom from social constraints in thought and action, as well as greater ability to engage in desired activities which a person may have difficulty doing when part of a dyad or a group. Second, spending time alone could facilitate creativity – many thinkers, artists, and writers from Michelangelo to Kafka have taken advantage of and advocated solitude in the production of masterpieces of creative thought and expression. In a letter to fellow writer Marcelo H. del Pilar, the nationalist poet and novelist José Rizal wrote, “I prefer to be buried in solitude” (Kalaw, 1930). Third, solitude could make individuals feel connections with significant others more intensely. This ironic process is exemplified in popular music

that suggests that when we are by ourselves, we often think of and long for the persons we love. Finally, solitude may be associated with enhanced spirituality. Many faith systems provide us with exemplars of individuals who have used time alone, often in prolonged periods, to develop wisdom and insight into the human condition, including Moses, Jesus of Nazareth, the prophet Muhammad, and the Buddha.

Empirical research supports the idea that solitude can be beneficial. ESM-based studies led by the developmental psychologist Reed Larson and colleagues (Larson, 1990, 1997, 1999; Larson & Lee, 1996) have shown, for example, that solitude experiences are indeed related to global as well as short-term psychological adjustment. In one ESM study that followed fifth to ninth graders for a one-week period, moderate amounts of time spent alone were significantly linked to fewer parent-reported behavioral problems, higher teacher-rated adjustment, lower depression scores, and even higher grade point averages (Larson, 1997). Another study documented lower levels of negative self-consciousness and higher levels of concentration among teenagers during times spent by themselves, followed by a boost in cheerfulness and alertness after two hours of solitude (Larson, 1999).

Other researchers have focused on the capacity for solitude and have found similar positive results. In one survey comparing US college students and unsheltered homeless adult men, individual differences in capacity for solitude were correlated with a stronger sense of personal freedom and higher self-acceptance (Sumerlin & Bundrick, 1996). Children who report being able to handle time alone exhibit more task autonomy inside the classroom and less social anxiety, compared to less able peers (Youngblade, Berlin, & Belsky, 1999). Among adults, comfort in spending time alone is correlated with lower sadness, fewer negative physical symptoms, and higher life satisfaction (Larson & Lee, 1996), as well as less frequent bouts of boredom and loneliness (Burger, 1995).

Despite these psychological benefits associated with solitude and its appreciation, time spent alone may not be readily appreciated by many. Even solitude researchers concede that spending time by oneself may not strike most people, especially adolescents, as an especially appealing activity. Following this observation combined with time alone's theorized and documented benefits, solitude has been described as "a bitter-tasting but salutary medicine" (Larson, 1997, p. 90).

Since solitude is a relatively accessible experience imbued with a range of possible benefits, how can its appreciation be deliberately developed? One solution may be found in the psychology classroom context – or more specifically, outside the classroom context. While direct instruction may

work to instill knowledge of solitude and its benefits, I argue that psychology teachers can enable students to engage time spent alone more positively using active learning and guided experience (Davis & Buskist, 2006; see also Eiser, Shook & Fazio, 2007, for the effects of exploration on appreciation and attitude formation, generally). Active learning exercises, which encourage students to experience a material in vivid, contextual ways and process information more deeply, are effective in developing appreciation and knowledge structures related to diverse psychological phenomena, in this case, solitude.

In this paper, I describe the structure and empirical evaluation of an active learning exercise from an undergraduate course in personality psychology designed to make students directly experience and appreciate time spent alone in an effective and enjoyable way.

METHOD

The Assignment: The Date with the Self

During a class discussion on solitude, I assigned students an out-of-classroom exercise – the date with the self. That is, students set aside an afternoon or evening of at least three hours to engage in personally chosen leisure activity entirely by themselves. I presented sample activities as suggestions, including going to a cinema, eating at a restaurant, visiting a park or museum, enjoying a walk in nature, etc., with the self as their “date”. Students were instructed not to think that they were not going on this date “alone”; rather, they would be going with a companion who is “very special”, i.e., themselves.

In addition to this fundamental cognitive frame, I posed a number of specific behavioral guidelines that would apply to any other type of date, like discouraging mobile phone use and book reading. The same way that constantly composing sms messages or burying oneself in a book during a date would probably be inconsistent with the goals of dating as shared pleasurable leisure time (Rose & Frieze, 1993), the date with the self required actively engaging time alone as a purposeful event. Students were given one week to carry out the date with the self and asked to submit a two-page reflection paper on their experience.

Evaluation Design

To test the efficacy of this exercise, I conducted an empirical evaluation of the date with the self by comparing before and after scores in views toward solitude of students who were assigned the activity, relative to a non-equivalent comparison group of students. In this pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design, baseline data on appreciation of time spent alone were collected via standardized questionnaires administered at the beginning of the semester. Parallel posttests were conducted in the class sessions immediately after the exercise (approximately two-thirds into the semester).

Participants

Fifty-four students (ages ranging from 18 to 20) in an undergraduate personality psychology course in a public university in Metro Manila participated in the exercise as part of course requirements. Students assigned to go on a date with the self were offered an alternative activity if they preferred otherwise; none took this option. A sample of 49 university students (ages from 18 to 20) taking introductory psychology who did not receive the exercise served as the comparison group. Pretest data on solitude appreciation were collected at the beginning of the semester, and posttests were conducted immediately after the exercise, approximately twelve weeks into the 16-week semester. Students answered the questionnaires confidentially, and all data were sealed and analyzed only at the end of the semester after final course marks had been handed out.

Measures

To measure appreciation for time spent alone, students answered $\alpha = 0.81$, posttest $\alpha = 0.80$). In addition, using a modified version of the Varieties of Solitude questionnaire (Long, Seburn, Averill, & More, 2003), daters rated how nine different meaningful aspects of solitude were applicable in their date experience, using seven-point Likert-type scales. These nine meanings of time spent alone, identified in the research literature using factor analysis (Long et al., 2003), were: (1) anonymity/autonomy; (2) creativity; (3) diversion; (4) inner peace; (5) intimacy; (6) negative affect; (7) problem-solving; (8) self-discovery; and (9) spirituality (see Appendix). Finally, enjoyment of the exercise was assessed using two items ("How enjoyable did you find

this activity?” and “How likely would you engage in an activity like this in the future?”), using seven-point Likert-type scaling, and later summed. Responses to the two enjoyment items showed good intercorrelation, $r(52) = 0.79, p < 0.001$ ($\alpha = 0.86$).

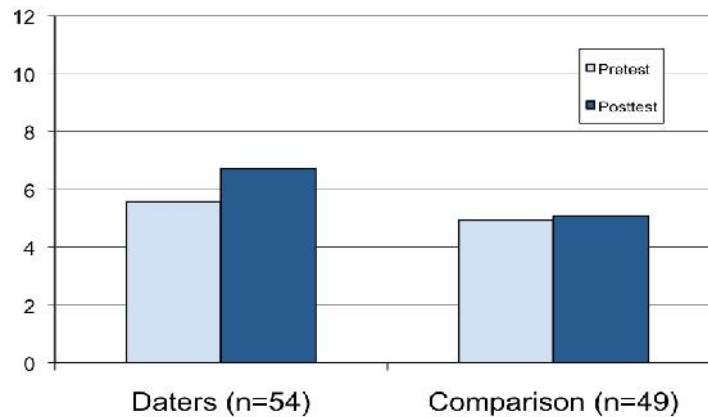
RESULTS

Gains in Solitude Appreciation

Students in the daters group reported baseline attitude levels not $M = 5.56, SD = 3.11$, vs. comparison $M = 4.94, SD = 3.11$). At the beginning of the semester, the two groups were comparable in attitudes toward time spent alone, $t(101) = 1.01, p > .1$.

After the activity, students from the daters group reported increased positive attitudes toward solitude (mean difference = +1.17, $SD = 2.14$). These gain scores were higher than those of students in the comparison group (mean difference = +0.14, $SD = 2.00$). As recommended by Dimitrov & Runrill (2003) for nonrandomized control-group designs, an analysis of covariance with pretest scores as a covariate was conducted. The difference in posttest scores for the two groups was significant, $F(1, 100) = 9.44, p < .01$. Going out on the date with the self had a positive impact on solitude appreciation (see Figure 1), and this increased appreciation was significant even when controlling for prior attitudes toward time spent alone.

Figure 1. Changes in appreciation of solitude among daters versus comparison group before and after the activity.



To explore factors that could account for the increase in solitude appreciation, an internal analysis using stepwise multiple regression was conducted on the daters subsample. Results suggested that a sense of anonymity/autonomy ($B=0.56, t=3.74, p<0.001$) and low levels of negative affect ($B = -0.35, t = -2.63, p < 0.01$) predicted increased solitude appreciation, $F(2,51) = 13.00, p < .001, R = 0.58, \text{adjusted } R^2 = 0.31$. That is, the individual freedom experienced during the time alone activity, along with low levels of negative emotion, contributed to the experience's impact on solitude appreciation.

Enjoyment of the Date With The Self

In addition to improving attitudes toward time spent alone, the date with the self also proved to be highly enjoyable ($M = 11.47, SD = 2.53$, on a 2-to-14 scale, with higher scores indicating higher enjoyment). Another regression analysis indicated that three factors contributed to enjoyment: feelings of calmness and serenity ($B = 0.42, t = 3.85, p < .001$), low levels of negative affect ($B = -0.37, t = -3.30, p < .01$), and baseline attitudes toward time spent alone ($B = 0.23, t = 2.37, p < .05$). This model accounted for a moderate amount of variance, $R = 0.74, \text{adjusted } R^2 = 0.51, F(3,50) = 19.56, p < .001$. A main contributor to the enjoyableness of the exercise was the calmness and serenity it provided; on the other hand, negative feelings about being alone made the exercise less enjoyable. Finally, as expected, prior individual differences in preference for time spent alone predicted overall enjoyment of the date with the self.

DISCUSSION

Unlike its distressing sibling loneliness, solitude can be a positive psychological experience. Solitude can be a context for self-renewal (Storr, 1988) and a tool for the pursuit of creativity and insight, as one basks in the freedom and serenity it can offer. The capacity to handle and enjoy solitude is also linked to psychological adjustment, including less depression, greater sense of personal agency, and higher life satisfaction. This appreciation of time spent alone can be developed using an active learning exercise such as the date with the self, in which individuals mindfully engage in a personally chosen leisure activity, with themselves as companions. Empirical assessment of the activity indicated that it serves as an effective and enjoyable exercise in spending time alone.

Aside from the exercise allowing personal fun and reflection during a point in the semester when academic workloads were increasing, informal accounts from students suggested that a salient aspect of the activity was the construction of the time spent alone as a “date”. Since dating is socially scripted as purposeful, interpersonal leisure time (Rose & Frieze, 1993), by activating this cognitive frame, students may have had the opportunity to rethink the meaning and value of time spent alone. Because dating is social, the purposeful companionship with oneself was emphasized. This is reflected in the explicit framing in the instructions for the activity: the exercise is not about time spent *without others*, but about time spent *with oneself*. Such a cognitive reappraisal of time spent alone can be a strategy not only to enable individuals to deal with the solitude that is inevitable in modern life (toward gaining “solitary skills”; Csikszentmihalyi, 1992), but to develop more positive attitudes about being alone – that indeed, solitude can be enjoyable and not an essentially lonely, negative experience.

In addition to cognitive reframing, another factor that may contribute to the impact of the date with the self is the mindful planning required by the exercise. Students had to make time in their schedules for the activity and decide on their own what leisure activities to pursue – in other words, the date was a concrete instance of “active solitude” (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982). As argued by positive psychologists, this process of planning, without the social constraints usually present in negotiating a date with another person (Rose & Frieze, 1993), can increase the likelihood of a positive experience and offer a sense of personal control over that pleasure (Bryant & Veroff, 2007).

Caveats and Conclusions

Interventions for addressing loneliness often rely on cognitive strategies or behavioral training to improve social skills (McWhirter & Joran, 1996). In this paper, I presented a simple out-of-classroom intervention that relies on a cognitive strategy enacted in behavioral terms, one that focuses not on alleviating loneliness, but on enhancing the positive experience of time spent alone. Such “positive interventions” (Sin & Lyubormisky, 2009) may not necessarily fix or remedy something deficient in the traditional clinical sense, but may be useful as an adjunct to strategies for preventing loneliness – an empirical question worth pursuing in future research. Also, the current intervention was evaluated using a quasi-experimental design with a small, university-based sample; further work on solitude and loneliness, using more rigorous experimental designs with more diverse samples, can provide further

insight on how solitude-based strategies can complement established loneliness-focused interventions in promoting well-being. Finally, cultural factors related to solitude need further study, given how culture structures notions of autonomy, connectedness, and their relationship with well-being (Larson, 1999; Lehman, Chiu & Schaller, 2004). Perhaps individualistic cultures place higher value on the thrill of freedom from social constraints brought about by solitude, while collectivist cultures, especially those influenced by Buddhist thought, may idealize the calmness and serenity it can bring (e.g., Tsai, Knutson & Fung, 2006). Indigenous meanings ascribed to time alone can also point to culture-sensitive interventions for promoting its appreciation (e.g., isolation in nature for Nordic cultures, based on the Finnish concept of *hiljaisuus*, “solitude in one’s thoughts” (Carbaugh, Berry & Nurmikari-Berry, 2006).

Time spent alone can be purposeful and enjoyable. Loneliness may be a persistent, complex problem that demands psychological analysis and intervention, but solitude is a positive experience also worth studying, savoring, and promoting.

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APPENDIX: FEATURES OF SOLITUDE
(ADAPTED FROM LONG ET AL., 2003)

1. *Solitude as Anonymity*. Because you were alone, you may have acted in whatever ways you felt like at the moment, without concern for social niceties of what others might think.
2. *Solitude as Creativity*. Being alone stimulated novel ideas or innovative ways of expressing yourself, whether actually in art, poetry, or intellectual pursuits, or whimsically in daydreaming with a purpose.
3. *Solitude as Diversion*. You filled the time alone by watching television, surfing the Internet, or engaging in other distracting activities.
4. *Solitude as Inner Peace*. While alone, you felt calm and relaxed, free from the pressures of everyday life.
5. *Solitude as Intimacy*. Although alone, you felt especially close to someone you care about, e.g., an absent friend or lover, or perhaps a deceased relative (such as a beloved grandparent); the absence of the person only strengthens your feeling of closeness.
6. *Solitude as Loneliness*. You felt self-conscious, anxious, or depressed; you longed for interpersonal contact.
7. *Solitude as Problem-Solving*. Aloneness provided the opportunity to think about specific problems or decisions you are facing, and you attempted to come to some resolution.
8. *Solitude as Self-Discovery*. By focusing attention on yourself, you gained insight into your fundamental values and goals and you came to realize your unique strengths and weaknesses.
9. *Solitude as Spirituality*. While alone, you may have had a mystic-like experience, e.g., a sense of transcending everyday concerns, of being a part of something grander than yourself; such experiences are sometimes interpreted within a religious context (e.g., being closer to God) but they can also be entirely secular (e.g., as in being in harmony with a social or natural order).