

Understanding the Potential of Solitude

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to investigate the positive psychology of solitude. Solitude can be viewed as a kind of positive aloneness, a sought out and enjoyable experience that is not usually associated with negative emotions. For some, spending time alone is to be avoided at all costs; for others, time spent alone can be enjoyable and a necessity. Solitude is a volitional state and as such is intrinsically considered a beneficial sort of aloneness in contrast to loneliness (McGraw, 2010). Making a clear distinction between these two very different experiences is key to exploring how therapists may collaborate with clients to find a sense of a personal private space, and explore the positive possibilities of time spent alone. Be it through creativity, spirituality or being immersed in nature, solitude and the awareness it can facilitate, allows for greater connection and participation with personal meanings and truths, both internally and in relationship.

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Chapter One: The Benefits of Solitude and Aloneness

There is an abundance of research and attention given to ideas of attachment, togetherness, and belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010), as being alone is often perceived as difficult, painful or cause for shame. The majority of study related time spent alone investigates loneliness (Distel et al., 2010, Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010, Moustakas, 1961, Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Loneliness has been associated with a broad range of adverse psychological outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, increased likelihood of substance misuse, lower social skills, a more critical view of self, and perfectionism (Zysberg, 2012).

Less study has focused on the benefits and positive experiences of being separate, apart or alone. Solitude expresses the glory of being alone, whereas loneliness expresses the pain of feeling alone (Cacioppo, 2014). Time spent alone has significant creative, spiritual, and artistic benefits, and allows time and space for self-reflection (Storr, 1989, Buchholz, 1997). People have biological needs for attachment, affiliation, and being social, yet they continually seek to spend time in solitude (Long & Averill, 2003). The following thesis will look at the phenomenon of aloneness and solitude in depth with the intention of expanding on the positive aspects of time spent alone.

Research Questions

How do we account for some individuals apparent need for solitude? What happens when we are alone or, more importantly, desire to be alone? What do people gain from time in solitude? How can negative experiences associated with being alone be avoided or used to ones advantage? Who has the capacity to be alone, to be separate, and feel comfortable or safe in that separateness and why?

Purpose Statement and Context

The objective of this paper is to gain a better understanding of what being alone and experiencing solitude entails, examining the positive psychology of solitude, and how to make it meaningful in a positive way. With this in mind, it is important to consider definitions, differences, and constructs around terms that are associated with aloneness and solitude. The following will be analyzed in the first chapter: loneliness, loner, introversion, isolation, and social phobia, as they all contain elements of time spent alone and each has different ideas and perceptions attached to them.

A few of these constructs will be further discussed in Chapter 2, a literature review. A more nuanced understanding of these concepts will allow for better guidance and counsel around how to approach solitude and aloneness, and help promote adaptive strategies to find the potential in solitude, rather than something to be avoided or dreaded. Chapter 3 will explore what we choose to do while alone, how we use time in solitude for growth, creativity and productivity. Looking outward at relations with others while alone, and looking inward at the self, towards what is created and what meaning arises from solitude. Chapter 4 will investigate the capacity to be alone, who has the ability to be alone and thrive, and why that might be. In concluding this thesis, further thoughts and potential for research and study will be addressed, as will suggestions on how to work with loneliness and the fear of being alone as a counselor working with clients.

Personal Interest

My interest in this topic, the benefits of solitude and how to be ok with being alone, stems from personal exploration around my own sense of self through solitude, along with a constant, desperate longing for peace and quiet. Most importantly, I am

curious about the pathologising of those with a desire or preference to be alone and how to resist or manage what seems like a constant barrage of pressure to be socially connected.

From a very young age I sought out time and space where I could have my thoughts to myself. I am the third of four children and family life was often chaotic. As a quiet and “sensitive” child, a reader, and daydreamer, I was fiercely independent. Being alone was a luxury and I took great comfort in it. When I first heard the term “introvert,” it felt as though I had found my people. I often feel overwhelmed and exhausted after being out in the world, socializing, or simply being in the presence of others for long periods of time. While I am hesitant around the popular-media’s generalizations and misconceptions around being an introvert, I appreciate the awareness and validation for my daily struggle to balance a need for connection with others and a need for time by myself.

More recently, an extended journey in therapy and plenty of time to myself while training for marathons, piqued my interest in the positive aspects of solitude. As did moving across the country, away from friends and chosen family, to do this Masters program. I am also motivated to find ways to explore constructive coping and acceptance for those who experience loneliness and fear being alone.

Analysis of Terms

When examining the nature of aloneness and solitude, it is useful to consider what they are not, what they are similar to, and what they are often perceived to be. Aloneness is the objective state of having no one around, a state of communicative rather than physical isolation; solitude is a state of voluntary aloneness, during which personality

development and creative activity may take place (Galanaki, 2004), Solitude involves fostering a deeper connection to the self, a sense of freedom, and spiritual connection, whereas aloneness can be more about being by oneself.

There are many words, ideas and constructs that are similar and influential to what will be addressed in this paper as aloneness or solitude. For the most part, the theoretically relevant terms and constructs explored below blend together at the edges or may overlap significantly. There are grey areas and true distinctions for each. It must be made clear that all of these terms get their meaning from the culture in which they occur. Interpersonal relationships, friendship, and love are dominant North American values (Rokach, 2004), as are individualism and independence. The ideas and their meanings presented below are viewed through a North American lens and may not necessarily translate to other cultures.

Loneliness

It is important to establish a clear definition of loneliness as it will be a large part of what is to be avoided or overcome within the experience of being alone or the seeking of solitude. Being able to identify those who are at risk of loneliness, helping with prevention, and looking at ways to cope and reduce distress around the experience, will depend on our understanding of the correlates, indicators, and antecedents of loneliness (Zysberg, 2012). There is a strong association between loneliness and being alone, the words are too much alike despite their quite different meanings. Many people think of loneliness as aloneness, a geographical distance from other people, and physical isolation from important others – however, being lonely is not necessarily being alone (Rokach, 2004). Loneliness can be defined as the negative emotional response to a discrepancy

between one's desired and perceived interpersonal relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). People need intimacy, warmth, a sense of worth, and frequent confirmation of their identities (Maslow, in Rokach, 2004). If that is unavailable or inadequate in one's relationships, there is a risk of the sadness, fear, dread, and shame associated with loneliness. The very idea of being alone may evoke deep childhood fears of abandonment and neglect, and cause some people to rush toward connectedness (Buchholz, 1997).

The first scientific research on loneliness depicted it as “a chronic distress without redeeming features” (Weiss, 1973). The feelings of distress, shame and fear that accompany the perception that one's social needs are not being met by the quantity or especially the quality of one's social relationships (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010) can be deeply painful, both physically and emotionally. A growing body of research indicates that loneliness predicts increased morbidity and mortality, impacts mental health and cognitive functioning, and can be associated with personality disorders and psychoses, suicide, increased risk of Alzheimer's Disease, diminished executive control, and increases in depressive symptoms (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Loneliness is a common source of anxiety and distress for a growing portion of the general population, with the elderly and marginalized youth being at an even higher risk (Zysberg, 2012).

We are all capable of feeling lonely, most people have felt lonely at some time or another in their lives and understand what it feels like. Despite it being a common human experience, shame around being lonely in Western cultures is high. Loneliness carries a significant social stigma. A lack of friendships and social connections is socially undesirable, and the perception of lonely people is generally unfavorable – if they are

unable to make friends, they must be inadequate and have undesirable qualities (Rokach, 2012). Being lonely is seen as being unworthy of meaningful connection.

If being alone and feeling lonely is painful, being lonely amongst others can be that much worse. Having people around and being social is seen as a way to cure loneliness in Western culture. If one can find acquaintances, friends, or an intimate partner, then loneliness is expected to dissipate. This sense of being part of a group does not always mean one is connecting or being seen. Being with others and still being unable to significantly connect, not belonging, and lacking the intimate closeness and acceptance that we all yearn for, evokes not only loneliness but self-doubt, anger, and shame (Rokach, 2004).

One objective of this paper is to look at how experiences of aloneness and solitude do not have to be feared or turn into loneliness. Paradoxically, and to a certain degree, loneliness can be useful. Like anxiety or guilt, it is part of the human condition, it indicates when one is not being understood and is perhaps too isolated from community and connection (Buchholz, 1997). Loneliness can be an incentive towards shifting ones thoughts and feelings, promote movement towards change, and it can spark creativity and productivity.

Loner

Another term associated with being alone that carries a negative connotation in our culture, is “loner.” The Miriam Webster Dictionary online defines a loner as “ a person who is often alone or who likes to be alone” (Loner, 2016), yet this term is most often used as a pejorative. Loners can be called crazy, cold, stuck-up, standoffish, aloof, afraid, lacking in social skill, bizarre, unable to connect, incapable of love, freaks, geeks,

sad, lonely, selfish, secretive, ungrateful, unfriendly, or serial killers (Rufus, 2003). In films and on television loners are often used as a trope, they are a villain, a scapegoat, or a minor character that negatively services the hero character.

Loners can also be recluses or hermits, retiring from society and living in solitude especially for religious reasons (Merriam-Webster Online, 2016). They are seen as eccentric or weird, causing suspicion and fear. In literature, a recluse might look like Miss Havisham in Dickens' "Great Expectations", Boo Radley in Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird", or Merseault, in Camus' "The Outsider." These kinds of characters are more "romantic" or idyllic loners, and while they may have some redeeming qualities, they come across as outcasts none-the-less.

Rufus (2003) attempts to reclaim and de-pathologize the term "loner" by describing being a loner as both a want and a need, to be separate and apart from others; Alone does not necessarily mean in solitude: we are not just the lone figure on the far shore. This is a populous world and we are most often alone in a crowd. It is a state less of body than mind. The word alone should not, for us, ring cold and hollow but hot. Pulsing with potentiality. Alone as in distinct. Alone as in, Alone in his field. As in, Stand alone. As in, like it or not, Leave me alone. (Rufus, 2003).

Despite this attempt at resisting the stigma and stereotypes around being a loner, the negative associations of being maladjusted and antisocial are pervasive. Currently, being considered a "loner" is closely linked to being a terrorist or serial killer thanks to media coverage of recent mass shootings, bombings and massacres. "Far-right Christian loner charged as Norway massacre toll hits 92," (Boyles, 2011), or "Terrorist or

Disturbed Loner? Munich Attack Reveals Shifting Labels,” (Fisher, 2016), and “Adam Lanza was a loner who didn't feel pain either physically or emotionally says former teacher.” (Geller, 2012). With this use of language, whether one spends time alone on their own volition or because they are unable to connect with others due to social anxiety or a lack of social skills, there is a perceived leap to “something must be wrong with this person” and they are negatively deemed “loner.”

Introversion-Extroversion

Rather than calling oneself a loner, there is the currently popular label of “Introvert.” In 1921, Jung popularized the terms *introvert* and *extrovert* and defined them as building blocks of personality – introverts are drawn to the inner world of thoughts, feelings and meanings, while extroverts tend towards a life of people, activities and events (Cain, 2012). Cain describes introverts generally as people who get their psychic energy from quiet reflection and solitude (not to be confused with people who are shy and become anxious in social situations); by contrast, extroverts thrive in groups of people and have long been prized in society for their ability to command attention – though people can share attributes of both personality types (Holson, 2015).

The recent popularity of Cain's book and Ted Talk (2012) – which, as of this time, has over 16 million views – brought the strengths and benefits of being an introvert into mainstream culture. A quick Internet search will find an abundance of celebrities who are self-identified introverts, tips for raising an introvert child, and dozens of online personality tests. The most widely known personality survey is the Meyers Briggs Type Indicator which is based on Jungian thinking, commonly used in management, education and counseling environments, and easily available online.

The validity of being an introvert, that interacting with people can be tiring and that needing time alone can be a good thing, is gaining recognition. What can be learned from how introverts use their time alone that might benefit those who fear being alone? How can those who do not identify as introverts learn to profit from time spent in solitude? These are questions for further investigation.

Isolation

Loneliness has a more subjective feel and stronger emotional content, mainly sadness; whereas isolation is an objective description, the fact of being alone (Wein, 2012). As a verb, the word “isolate” can mean to alienate, cut off, disconnect, divorce, ostracize, and generally exclude, all of which suggests negative aloneness and implies an involuntary or involitional sort of isolation (McGraw, 2010). It could be said that isolation also carries a feeling of lacking or desolation, which are also strong in terms of emotional content. Social withdrawal can be broadly defined as the process whereby a person removes himself/herself from opportunities for social interaction, whereas social isolation describes being actively excluded by peers from participating in social activities (Rubin, Coplan & Bowker, 2009).

Isolation can be imposed by outside forces, such as when it is used as punishment. For example, putting a child into “time out” by removing her from friends, family, fun or distraction. Or, a prisoner might be put into solitary confinement, removed from the rest of the population while already isolated from the world. Social isolation can be defined as when an individual lacks a sense of belonging, social engagement and quality relationships with others (Dury, 2014). Existential psychotherapist Yalom (1980) saw

isolation as one of the four core concepts of existence (freedom, death and meaninglessness being the other three).

Yalom (1980) divided isolation into three types: interpersonal (loneliness, isolation from other individuals); intrapersonal (suppresses ones own feelings or desires, and accepts others'), and existential, (an unbridgeable gulf between oneself and any other being; a separation between the individual and the world.)” For Yalom, isolation is an inevitable and unavoidable aspect of being a human existing in the world.

Social Phobia

Another type of solitude may be the expression of social phobia or other psychopathology (Wein, 2012), such as avoidant personality disorder. The essential feature of Social Anxiety Disorder (Social Phobia) according to the DSM-V is a marked, or intense, fear of anxiety of social situations in which the individual may be scrutinized by others (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These feelings could lead an individual to choose to be alone or seek solitude as an escape from potentially terrifying social situations. It is the fear of being embarrassed or humiliated that generally results in avoidant behavior (Janowsky, Morter and Tancer, 2000). Avoidant Personality Disorder is described as a pervasive pattern of social inhibition, feelings of inadequacy, and hypersensitivity to negative evaluation that begins in early adulthood and happens in a variety of contexts (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Those experiencing anxiety and fear to this degree would seek solitude for reflection and self-soothing.

Essential to consider with these DSM-5 definitions is that they are considered diagnosable diseases – a person is labeled by science to be dysfunctional. Fear of public speaking, fear of being judged by others or being humiliated to the point of effecting job

performance, for example, is not just an annoyance or disadvantage in the world, but an actual *disease* (Cain, 2012). The problem therefore lies within the person and does not take into account that perhaps some anxiety, distress and discomfort around social situations might be normal and even tolerable for some people.

Aloneness

Aloneness is often viewed as a necessary but dreaded part of human existence. The average person spends nearly 80% of waking hours in the company of others, most of which is spent in small talk (Distel et al., 2010). Depending on the individual, the other 20% can be seen as either valuable or terrifying. People may avoid being alone because they associate it with the pain of loneliness, abandonment and isolation. But being alone is the objective reality of being without others, geographically being away from company (Rokach, 2004). It is a state of being that is neither positive nor negative. It may be a purely cognitive experience, a geographical reality, or a crisis in one's life (Rokach, 2004). One's background, experiences and expectations play into how one views and engages in time spent without others.

Some find comfort in times spent alone, regardless of whether it is a choice or because of a particular circumstance. An aversion to aloneness refers to experiencing solitude as a time of boredom, unhappiness, and unease, whereas an affinity for aloneness refers to using solitude for active and constructive purposes (Teppers, Luyckx, Vanhalst, Klimstra & Goossens, 2014). One's subjective experience is influenced by even the smallest interaction with another human being – aloneness can minimize the self-consciousness involved in experiencing oneself as the object of another person's thoughts and ideas (Long & Averill, 2003). Choosing to benefit from time alone is about being

away from interacting with others, to be alone with ones thoughts, to focus, and turn inward.

Solitude

Many spiritual leaders, philosophers, writers and artists have spoken of the benefits of solitude. Moses, Jesus, Mohammed and the Buddha all sought solitude and shared with others what they discovered; in literature, Thoreau, Kafka, Dickinson and Woolf all noted the role of solitude in their creative processes (Long & Averill, 2003). The connection between solitude and spirituality, and solitude and creativity are almost cliché: nuns and monks in secluded mountain monasteries, or a writer in a cabin the middle of nowhere. Solitude, more than aloneness, carries positive emotional weight with these connections to spirituality, nature, creativity and peacefulness.

Solitude can be viewed as kind of positive aloneness, a sought out and enjoyable experience that is not usually associated with negative emotions. Solitude is a volitional state and as such is intrinsically considered a beneficial sort of aloneness in contrast to loneliness (McGraw, 2010). In solitude one can gain a better understanding of who they are and what they are capable of becoming.

The ideal experience of solitude is a state characterized by disengaging from the demands of others, a state of reduced social inhibition, and greater freedom to choose one's activities (Long & Averill, 2003). To be in solitude is to bear the silence, to enjoy it; to hear ones thoughts, follow them, and know ones own mind – conversely, if the silence drives one to anxious distraction, to fill in the fearful silence, then this is the terror of loneliness (Wein, 2012). Solitude is not simply the opposite of engagement with others, experiences of aloneness are dynamic and intertwined within connectedness and

relationship. There is no clear boundary between solitude and encounter, rather a range of degrees of involvement and detachment from other people (Barbour, 2004).

An obvious benefit of solitude is a gained sense of freedom. Solitude offers the freedom from interacting with others, from distraction and inhibitions. It also offers freedom to engage in self-reflection, enhance spirituality and cultivate creativity. Knafo (2012a) suggests that there is enforced solitude and voluntary solitude. Enforced solitude is a type of incarceration either imposed by others or by oneself, and voluntary solitude is freely chosen alone time for pursuit of a personal purpose. Both can be productive and creative, though voluntary solitude is clearly the preferable state.

Tillich stated: “Language has created the word ‘loneliness’ to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word ‘solitude’ to express the glory of being alone (King, 2013).” □ Solitude is not an emotion, but a condition, the state of which may be accompanied by various emotions or by none at all (Barbor, 2004). The words *aleness* and *solitude* share similar connotations of neutrality and choice. It is necessary to distinguish both solitude and aleness from the more pathology-based terms of loneliness, unsociability, alienation and isolation. Time spent alone can be a powerful psychological experience with potential benefits. While the term *solitude* can have more volitional and positive associations than *aleness*, they will be used interchangeably through out this paper.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Types of Solitude

The majority of research around solitude focuses on the negative effects of being alone or lonely, and very little on how aloneness is experienced (Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999, Hawley & Cacioppo, 2010). To study and gather information on what people do and how they go about being alone is difficult because to do so would mean a person is not alone anymore. As a result, most data that is available for study around solitude is based on self-reports which are subject to bias, and often people are hesitant to self-reveal around aloneness and loneliness (Buchholz & Catton, 1999).

Solitude is best conceptualized as a state of relative social disengagement often characterized by decreased social inhibitions and increased freedom to choose one's mental and physical activities (Long & Averill, 2003). Long, Seburn, Averill and More (2003) proposed nine types of solitude determined from gathering descriptions provided by participants in previous studies and taxonomies of aloneness related experiences:

- *Solitude as anonymity*: When alone, acting without concern for what others think.
- *Solitude as creativity*: Being alone sparks new ideas and ways of expression, be it with art, poetry, intellectual pursuits, or daydreaming.
- *Solitude as diversion*: Filling time alone watching television, reading a book, being on the Internet, or other distracting activities.
- *Solitude as inner peace*: While alone, feeling calm and relaxed, free from the pressures of daily life.

- *Solitude as intimacy*: Although alone, feeling especially close to someone that is cared for, ie. an absent friend or lover, a deceased relative; their absence strengthens feelings of closeness.
- *Solitude as loneliness*: Feeling self-conscious, anxious, or depressed; longing for interpersonal contact.
- *Solitude as problem solving*: Aloneness provides the opportunity to think about specific problems or decisions being faced and trying to come to a resolution.
- *Solitude as self-discovery*: By focusing attention on the self, gaining insight into core values and goals and recognizing unique strengths and weaknesses.
- *Solitude as spirituality*: While alone, having a mystic-like experience, a sense of transcending everyday concerns, of being a part of something bigger than the self; can sometimes be interpreted within a religious context – such as being close to god. They can also be secular, as in being in harmony with a social or natural order.

Through factor analysis, Long, Seburn and Averill (2003) used this information to conclude that the nine types of solitude could be reduced to three dimensions, two positive and one negative. Inner-Directed Solitude (self-discovery, inner peace), Outer-Directed Solitude (intimacy and spirituality) and Loneliness. These dimensions and the types of solitude will be expanded in the following chapters, they represent the empirical basis and frame of reference for this thesis, making explicit the benefits of solitude as distinct from the experience of loneliness.

Social Contact And Well-Being

Much attention is paid to “togetherness” in our world, especially now through social media, and the benefits of time spent with others are widely researched. A study by Diener and Seligman (2002) found a strong correlation between happiness and being social; very happy people have rich and satisfying social relationships and spend little time alone compared to average people. But, it is not clear if those rich social lives caused happiness, or if happiness caused rich social lives, or if both were caused by something else entirely. Often, social relationships and solitude are presented in the literature as mutually exclusive, either/or. Good social relationships do not guarantee happiness, but happiness does not appear to occur without good social relationships (Diener & Seligman, 2002).

Is it a mistake to seek solitude as a way to conserve energy or feel better? Epley and Schroeder (2014) looked at why, if connecting with others increases happiness, do strangers in close proximity routinely ignore each other. It was posited that the reasons why people do not interact in situations such as commuting on buses and trains or sitting in a waiting room, are that people feel as though either solitude is a more positive experience than interacting with strangers, or they misunderstand the consequences of these kinds of social connections. Perhaps not surprisingly, it was found that participants reported a more positive, and no less productive, experience when they connected with others than when they did not. Separate participants in each context, however, expected precisely the opposite outcome, predicting a more positive experience in solitude (Epley & Schroeder, 2014).

Roeters, Cloin & van der Lippe (2013) studied the associations between solitary time and mental health by looking at the positive and negative effects of solitary time from a sociological perspective. Even though time spent alone can limit access to social resources and support, which can adversely affect mental health, it can also help individuals to recharge. It was presumed that individual evaluations of solitary time are affected by role expectations and demands, that the association between solitary time and mental health was nonlinear and moderated by gender and life stage (Roeters, Cloin & van der Lippe, 2013). Results indicated that solitary time had either a negative effect or no effect at all and the assumption that solitary time is discretionary, productive, and tranquil did not hold. In fact, more solitary time in leisure was associated with a reduction in mental health as it was found that those leading busy lives had to make great efforts to be alone and did so only because they felt they had to for the study.

Personality has been shown to be a strong predictor of subjective well being – encompassing both affective evaluation, such as happiness, and cognitive appraisal, as in life satisfaction (Weninger & Holder, 2013). In particular, extraversion is the personality trait that is most positively and consistently related to subjective well-being; the two are thought to be linked by biological, genetic, behavioural, and situational variables (Weninger & Holder, 2013). Looking at behaviour, Wilt, Nofle, Fleeson, and Spain (2012), suggest that it is what extraverts do – they act extraverted and are more social – in addition to the temperamental features they possess, which results in extraverts having higher levels of positive affect than introverts.

The idea of “belonging” also comes into play. Human beings are among the most sociable of all animals, not only do we live together in groups, but we spend much of our

daily lives interacting with others – working, playing, sleeping together – and much of human life seems to focus on fostering and maintaining a certain number of supportive interpersonal relationships (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell & Schreindorfer, 2013). The experience of belongingness can be thought of as a positive affective state that involves feelings of comfort and security derived from the perception that one is an integral part of a community, place, organization, or institution (Asher & Weeks, 2014). Although most people desire to be accepted and to belong to social groups, the strength of this desire for acceptance and belonging can differ depending on a person's traits, values, emotions, and behaviors that have important implications for people's emotional and social lives (Leary et al., 2013). In nine separate studies, Leary et al. (2013) found that “need to belong” test scores were not related to insecure attachment or unfulfilled needs for acceptance, but with extraversion, agreeableness, and low neuroticism, and with having an identity that is defined in terms of social attributes.

When asked “what is necessary for happiness?” the majority of respondents in a study by Distel et al. (2010) rated “relationships with family and friends” as most important. Happiness is often equated to connecting with others, being outgoing and socially active. But this is not exclusive of introverts or those who tend to seek out solitude. Introverts may have strong social skills and enjoy parties and meetings with groups, they simply prefer to devote their social energy to close friends, colleagues and family (Cain, 2012).

Loneliness

The bulk of study related to solitude investigates loneliness and as a result, a lot of the research projects the idea that being alone as primarily negative (Boss, Kang &

Branson, 2015, Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Cacioppo et al. (2006) postulated that loneliness evolved as a psychological mechanism for protection, to encourage individuals to build social connections as a way to increase possibilities for survival. They looked at evolutionary mechanisms for loneliness and found that loneliness may have evolved as an aversive state that encourages behaviour change to increase the likelihood of survival. It has been posited that loneliness is the social equivalent of physical pain, hunger, and thirst; the pain of social disconnection and the hunger for social connection motivates the connection and reconnections necessary for the survival of our genes (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Hawkley and Cacioppo (2010) view human beings as thoroughly social creatures and explored the health burden of loneliness. Their model for loneliness posits that perceived social isolation is equivalent to feeling unsafe, setting off implicit hypervigilance for seeing the world as a lonely place, which then can influence physiological functioning, reduce sleep quality, and increase morbidity and mortality. Social connections with a mate, a family, and a tribe foster positive social relationships that enhance the likelihood that offspring reach reproductive age, and connections with others improve chances of survival in difficult or hostile environments (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010).

Loneliness: A Sourcebook of Current Theory, Research and Therapy (1982) by Peplau and Perlman, was fundamental in contributing to a better understanding of the distinction between being alone and loneliness. Peplau and Perlman (1982) developed the cognitive discrepancy model showing that individuals develop an internal standard or expectation against which they judge their interpersonal relationships – if their relationships exceed these expectations, then individuals will not experience feelings of

loneliness, if they do not, then they will.

In considering the subjectivity of loneliness, Li, Cutrona, McRae, and Gomez (2012) utilized Peplau and Perlman's cognitive discrepancy model to see the discrepancy between young adults' ideal number and actual number of close friends and found it to be related in a nonlinear fashion to feelings of satisfaction with close friendships and loneliness. The results show that loneliness is not synonymous with being alone, at least in the context of certain aspects of interpersonal relationships. Individuals who are lonely do not necessarily report having fewer close friendships, instead predicting loneliness must take into consideration the number of close friendships that are desired (Russell et al., 2012).

Another variable to consider when looking at loneliness is self-worth. Through studying adolescents, Vanhalst, Luyckx, Scholte, Engels and Goossens (2013) suggest that lowered self-esteem may be a direct reflection or internalization of the experience of loneliness. Results indicated that self-esteem and loneliness influenced one another in a reciprocal manner and that the dominant path from self-esteem to loneliness was partially mediated by perceived—but not actual—social acceptance (Vanhalst et al., 2013).

Shyness and low self-esteem are related to each other and also related to loneliness.

People who are shy are less talkative and exhibit a lack of interaction with peers (Kingery, Erdley, Marshall, Whitaker, & Reuter, 2010), which may explain why shyness is a well-established predictor of loneliness.

Rokach (2012) described our time as the age of relationships – people believe in the uniqueness, importance, and availability of relating to others, and it is relationships that appear to be one of the only ways self-esteem can be affirmed. We yearn for close

intimate relationships, yet social conditions are more conducive to creating isolation. Everyone is seeking companionship, and everyone seems to be having trouble finding it (Rokach, 2012).

The “communications revolution” that began with the telephone and continues with Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram, helps dissolve the boundary between social life and isolation (Heller, 2012). Technology and social networking present the opportunity to constantly be seen and heard, but how does the Internet and “social networking” effect loneliness? Has the opportunity to be connected to others day and night enhanced well-being? Amichai-Hamburger and Hayat (2011) conducted an international research project to determine how media effects different aspects of our lives. They found that social media usage can enhance the social lives of its users, such as increase contact with family, friends, and people who work in the same field. The Internet is also a way for people who lack social skills to improve how they interact and connect with others through all types of social networks online, most commonly through websites connecting those looking for romantic relationships (Whitty, 2008).

The Internet can also increase the social contacts of lonely people without alleviating their loneliness. From a large-scale, three year study of adolescents and adults, those who used social networking sites had more face-to-face social contacts and a greater number of acquaintances than nonusers. But these users, and particularly male users, indicated that they were in fact more lonely than nonusers (Brandtzaeg, 2012). There can be difficulty and discomfort in aloneness, even for those who seek it out. Loneliness can also serve as a stimulus for self-exploration - the distress of loneliness

may provide a stimulus for emotional and spiritual creativity and offer the chance to reflect on what it means to be by yourself and to be yourself (Wein, 2012). Loneliness may serve as an ideal time for writing, reflecting and meditating, reviewing ones life and making decisions to move forward (Rokach, 2004).

Preference For Solitude

Do some people simply have a greater desire to be alone than others? Through a series of experiments, Burger (1995) developed the Preference for Solitude Scale to assess individual differences in preference for solitude. It was proposed that some people tend towards being alone to avoid the discomfort of negative evaluation from others, while others choose to be alone because they appreciate and value time alone. For many people, a high preference for solitude is related to positive well-being. Burger (1995) found that people who prefer solitude are not anti-social, in fact, they enjoy the company of others, but when given a choice, they would choose time alone.

Solitude is often used to represent a type of privacy. Privacy usually refers to an ability to control the degree to which other people and institutions intrude upon one's life – solitude as a subtype of privacy, refers to a condition in which a person is alone and unobserved but not necessarily separated from others by formidable barriers or great distance (Long & Averill, 2003). Deciding what information about ourselves is available to others does not require isolation, therefore privacy is a subjective experience.

Wang, Rubin, Laursen, Booth-LaForce and Rose-Krasnor (2013) examined a diverse sample of teenagers to look at whether preference-for-solitude would be differentially associated with psychological and emotional adjustment. Results indicated

that preference-for-solitude was more strongly associated with maladjustment for younger adolescents than for older adolescents. Specifically, preference-for-solitude was associated with greater anxiety, depression and emotion dysregulation, as well as lower self-esteem and lower social competence for younger adolescents, but not for older adolescents (Wang et al., 2013). Solitude is viewed negatively in early adolescence but becomes more acceptable in late adolescence as youth are granted more independence and behavioural autonomy (Wang et al., 2013).

Living alone is common, if not expected, in western cultures. One-person households account for more than 40% of all households in Sweden and Finland; more than one third of all households in France, Germany, and England; and more than one quarter of all households in the United States, Russia, Canada, Spain, and Japan (Klinenberg, 2016). DePaulo (2014) writes about being single or unattached to a romantic partner in a society preoccupied with marriage, weddings and couplings. A person who is choosing to spend time alone and choosing to be single is more likely to be satisfied with how they spend their time than if experiences are thrust upon them. Choosing to live alone is a way to mediate the time a person spends alone with the time they spend with others.

For the elderly, living alone is not necessarily indicative of having poor social support and being lonely. Perissinotto & Covinsky (2014) found that social isolation and loneliness are complex self-perceptions that may not be fully captured by whether or not someone lives alone, it requires looking deeper into an individual's personal perspective and context. The number of older adults living alone increases with age as they are more likely to be widowed, and most older people prefer to live in their own homes and remain

independent for as long as they are able. This preference comes from a desire for privacy and familiar surroundings, and also from social forces that favor living alone throughout the lifespan – ie, the availability of amenities in urban areas, increased income support for older people which helps facilitate “aging in place,” and support at a distance from family members (Wethington & Pillemer, 2014).

Capacity For Solitude

For some, to be in solitude is to bear the silence and enjoy it; to hear ones thoughts and know ones own mind – for others, the silence causes anxious distraction and fear, the terror of loneliness (Wein, 2012). Why is being alone tolerable for some and for others it is not? Solitude is an opportunity for reflection and emotional recharging, and may counteract stress in a similar way to that of social support. Individuals able to use solitude for appraisal and emotional regeneration may be more resilient to stress, irrespective of their relationships with others (Larson & Lee, 1996). A study by Larson and Lee (1996) examined the capacity to be alone as a way to buffer stress in a way that was comparable to that of social support. Solitude can be recognized as having a two-dimensional relationship with psychological well-being – the cognitive and emotional dimensions (Larson & Lee, 1996). The average U.S. adult spends approximately 30% of their day alone, according to this research, and those individuals who are able to enjoy this segment of their lives can be better adjusted, feel calm when alone, and tend to structure solitary time into their daily lives.

The capacity to be alone, according to Winnicott (1958), is an important marker of maturity. It is about how a person reacts and maintains a sense of self without the presence and support of others. The capacity for solitude reflects the integration of the

public and private self and the ability to be separate from others without succumbing to impulse, loneliness, or fear (Larson, 1990).

Development And Attachment

One of the core concepts of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) is that humans are born with a psychobiological, attachment behavioral system that motivates seeking proximity to significant others in times of need for protection and support, safety and security (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014). Interpersonal problems and low-quality, unstable relationships of those who are insecurely attached can result in subjective feelings of loneliness – not only through having few friends or social opportunities, but by being in poor-quality relationships that lack feelings of intimacy and emotional closeness, where a person feels unloved, unaccepted, or not validated by a relationship partner (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014).

Buchholz & Catton (1999) saw aloneness as a developmental necessity parallel to attachment and a positive experience essential to personal growth. Both Winnicott (1958) and Buchholz (1997) viewed the capacity to be alone as part of a healthy maturational process and that it is learned – similar to attachment in that individuals have to learn how to relate. A landmark paper by Winnicott (1958) focused specifically on the positive aspects of the capacity to be alone, as opposed to the fear or desire to be alone or in a withdrawn state. Winnicott (1958) saw the capacity to be alone as one of the most important signs of maturity in emotional development. A basic experience that determines the capacity to be alone is that of being alone as a small child in the presence of a parent. Those who, as infants, were allowed to explore, play and occupy themselves within the comfort and safety of their parents presence, are often those who can best

experience the benefits of solitude (Winnicott, 1958).

Solitude is important to the developmental task of identity formation according to Erikson (1968) and the ability to profit from solitude requires a sense of self that can survive in the absence of immediate social reinforcement (Larson, 1990). The freedom from the influence of others, the opportunity to step outside of fixed definitions of the self assigned by friends or parents may provide an important chance to form a personally defined self (Larson, 1990). This kind of growth and identity formation takes place primarily in adolescence.

Individual differences in the preference for, and capacity to benefit from, solitude may begin at a very young age – some theorists believe that individual differences in infant-caregiver attachment may have an enduring influence on how time spent alone is experienced (Long & Averill, 2003). Winnicott (1958), Modell (1993), and others suggest that people who are securely attached (low avoidance and low anxiety toward close relationships) would have positive experiences with solitude, whereas people who are insecurely attached (high avoidance and high anxiety toward close relationships) would have a negative experience with solitude (Long et al., 2003). Buchholz (1999) stated that alonetime and attachment are not mutually exclusive, but complimentary and examines the importance of aloneness in the growth, development, and maturation of the individual and society. Buchholz (1999) sees attachment theory as stressing connection above everything else in life, which can distort expectations of relationships and neglect the complimentary need for time alone.

Research has shown that, across the lifespan, the need or preference for solitude tends to evolve. As preadolescence progresses into adolescence solitude comes to be

experienced positively; in adulthood, the amount of time one spends in solitude appears to be as much a function of one's social circumstances as it is a voluntary decision (Long & Averill, 2003). In a study by Larson (1990), whether engaged in a productive activity or leisure, adolescents experienced solitude to be the most lonely and retired adults reported it to be the least lonely - with age solitude appears to be less likely to induce painful feelings of separation from others. From birth through to old age, a person will experience more and more time alone as they get older and are therefore better equipped to cope with the psychological demands of solitude (Larson, 1990).

Socioemotional selectivity theory proposes that as people age, they become more and more influenced by the awareness of a limited time horizon (Carstensen, 1992). This awareness leads them to maximize social and emotional gains and minimize risks – ie. they become more selective with their relationships, preferring the most rewarding social connections and deemphasizing relationships that are disruptive, full of conflict or unreliable. Having fewer social relationships and therefore spending more time alone, may not necessarily be a negative, but more about quality over quantity (Wethington & Pillemer, 2014).

Creativity

The connection between creativity, art and solitude is almost cliché – writers retreat to cabins in the woods, painters are locked in their studios for days on end. The freedom from social constraint and the influence of others provide the opportunity to concentrate deeply and feel less self-conscious (Larson, 1990). Artists, scientists, scholars, and all manner of thinkers and planners often retreat from others to bring their ideas into being (Knafo, 2012a). Many writers and poets – Kafka, Thoreau, and Rilke,

for example – made solitude part of their creative regimens (Long et al., 2003).

According to Knafo (2012a), a serious artist may spend the majority of their adult life in the solitary pursuit of creation, and only brought into relationship with others for verification and validation. Storr (1988) argued that an artists primary source of self-esteem and personal fulfillment often derives from their artistic output rather than from their interpersonal relationships.

Solitude can facilitate creativity by stimulating imaginative involvement in multiple realities and by “trying on” alternative identities, leading, perhaps, to self-transformation (Long & Averill, 2003). The development of an imaginary world can sometimes serve as a retreat from unhappiness, a compensation for loss, and a basis for creative achievement (Storr, 1988).

Spirituality

Feeling lonely is a chance to reflect on what it means to be by yourself and to be yourself (Wein, 2012). A deeper appreciation and connection to spirituality is often touted as a benefit of solitude, as scholars have promoted solitude as an opportunity for self-reflection, healing and emotional renewal (Suedfeld, 1982). For thousands of years up to present day, monks and nuns of various religious persuasions choose to seclude themselves in devotional solitude, and solitary meditation is part of many types of spiritual practices (Long et al., 2003).

Yalom (1980) theorized that “solitude, silence, time, and the freedom from everyday distractions” (p.8) are necessary to allow for deep personal exploration about one’s existence. John Barbour (2004) states that solitude becomes spiritual when breaking out of ordinary social interactions leads to a clearer knowledge of who one truly

is, to a better relationship to all aspects of reality, especially those aspects that are essential, valuable and life affirming.

The potential benefits of solitude are most often discussed in the context of other cultures, and a specific subset of individuals within our culture, and among others who have advocated solitude - especially spiritual leaders, artists, scholars, scientists, poets and philosophers (Larson, 1990; Long & Averill, 2003). Many religious leaders, including Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed, spent a significant amount of time in solitude. Even in present day, monks and nuns of various religious beliefs seclude themselves in devotional solitude, and solitary meditation is a part of many spiritual regimens (Long et al., 2003).

Spirituality is closely related to feelings of intimacy or connectedness to others and to the world. As the world becomes more crowded, busy and connected, it has become difficult to find time and space to be alone. Being in and experiencing nature is a significant topic in relation to spirituality and solitude. In recognizing the potential benefits of solitude, the United States passed the Wilderness Act of 1964 (U.S. Public Law 88-577) that mandated congressionally designated wilderness areas “to preserve natural conditions, to provide opportunities for solitude, and to provide a primitive and unconfined type of recreation” (Shafer & Hammitt, 1995, p. 266). Whether in a forest, a church, or at home, within a state of solitude a person can withdraw into the intimacy of a spiritual encounter with oneself, one’s environment, or one’s God.

Chapter Three: Doing, Being, and Solitude

Solitude is not simply about spending time alone, but about the opportunity for complex thinking and internal conversations with ones self that can lead to personal growth, creativity, and productivity. Very little research has been conducted on how aloneness is experienced, as to do so would disrupt the space in which a person is alone and the experience of solitude itself. The average adult spends upwards of 30% of their waking hours alone, be it by choice or by circumstance (Larson, 1990). The most common settings for solitude can be grouped into three general categories: at home, in a public place – a coffee shop, library, a shopping mall, or, in nature – woods, park, beach, or mountains (Long et al., 2003). Larson (1990) found that the great majority of daily solitude reported by people of all ages occurs at home, and the range of activities reported was diverse. There is productive activity, such as work or schoolwork; daily tasks, such as cooking and cleaning; or leisure activities, like watching television, being on the internet, reading, listening to music or daydreaming.

Whether physically alone or in the presence of others but not engaged with anyone else, solitude can serve as respite from too much social contact and relational responsibility. It is an opportunity to mindfully engage in whatever one chooses to do. Choosing not to participate in social activities, to not talk or share with others, has the potential to cultivate all kinds of extraordinary thoughts and feelings, and generative and self-nurturant activities (Larson, 1990). What do people do when they choose to be alone? How do these activities relate to their well-being? Is time alone associated with loneliness or rejuvenation, both or neither? Is it possible to articulate the experience of solitude?

Phillips (1993) presented the notion of fertile solitude. “A fertile solitude is a benign forgetting of the body that takes care of itself...a productive solitude, the solitude in which what could never have been anticipated appears, is linked with a quality of attention (p.40).” Similar to fertile solitude is the notion of “flow” presented by Csikszentmihalyi (2015). “Flow” is the state of involved enjoyment felt in moments when one is fully absorbed in an activity that has personal meaning. Spending time immersed in this sense of effortless concentration, freedom, and enjoyment, is seen as vital for a fulfilling life. 'Flow' is a similar sensation to 'being in the zone' for athletes, a strong sense of ease and momentum, where there is a sense of discovery and control. This usually occurs when the body or mind is pushed to its limits.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Long et al. (2003) proposed nine types of solitude - Solitude as anonymity, creativity, diversion, inner peace, intimacy, loneliness, problem solving, self-discovery, and spirituality. These were then reduced to three dimensions, two positive and one negative – Inner-Directed Solitude, Outer-Directed Solitude, and Loneliness. Each type of solitude was determined from feelings, activities and outcomes of a person’s time spent alone. Solitude is strongly related to the self and larger existential dimensions, and is a distinct from the concept of loneliness.

John Barbour (2004) discusses five basic values that are sought in solitude and closely linked to the ethical justification and spiritual meaning of solitude, and are purposes and concerns that may best be addressed during periods of aloneness: creative work, self-formation, healing, attunement to nature, and adventure. These themes and values are discussed in the following through examining aspects of the positive dimensions of solitude. First, by looking outward at solitude in relation to others and the

big picture, then inward, at deeply investigating the self and what meaning arises from that process.

Alone Together

“When we are alone, we are still with others; and when with others, we are still alone.” (Knafo, 2012b, p. 84).

Solitude can be seen as a “vital social phenomenon,” the spiritual, religious, creative, and artistic gains that have come from solitary experiences have impacted social movements and practices, and solitaires, monks and hermits have long played influential parts in human societies (Long & Averill, 2003). Solitude is usually regarded in opposition to social relationship, as though we are forced to choose between being alone or being with community, nothing in-between. This false dichotomy between the self and community posits that the self cannot be relational without community; from this perspective individuals who choose to be alone might be considered doomed to loneliness, since their intimacy needs can never be satisfied in solitude (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014). While it may seem counterintuitive, solitude and relationship are intertwined and layered experiences that interact with one another.

“Solitude,” “relationship,” intimacy,” and “connectedness” are dynamic, permeable, and often simultaneous states that are in constant dialogue with each other (Knafo, 2012b). There is an assumption with solitude that it involves getting away, physically escaping the place we are in and the people around us, to be somewhere else, a place that offers more freedom, a chance to slow down, opportunity to think, rest, and regroup. Salmon and Matarese (2014) suggest that attaining a state of physical solitude may only sharpen awareness of how agitated we really are, and that eliminating external

stimulation could actually add to mental turbulence. Aloneness and separation can facilitate the amplification of thoughts and feelings.

People have biological needs for attachment, affiliation, and sociality, yet they continually seek to spend time alone (Long & Averill, 2003). A person may feel overwhelmed or overstimulated by social contact, the energy it requires and the responsibilities it entails. Maintaining a balance of engagement with others and periods of alonetime, or finding places and ways to be in between the two seems key, and points in the direction of a balanced middle way of living (Salmon & Matarese, 2014).

Solitude is often a shared experience that can be fruitfully sought in the presence of, or at least with the support of other, like-minded individuals (Salmon & Matarese, 2014). For example, group meditation or silent retreats are common settings for those seeking to be alone for self-exploration or stress reduction purposes, but with the possibility for support if needed. The experience of being alone while amongst a group of people who are seeking similar goals, can be comforting and offer a sense of aloneness yet also being part of a greater community. Clinical programs for mindfulness-based stress reduction practices use sitting meditation in silence interspersed with opportunities to share experiences and offer support if needed. This kind of supportive social context is reminiscent of the concept of *sangha*, the shared experience of like-minded persons (Salmon & Matarese, 2014).

There can be different levels of engagement or involvement with others while alone. For example, being one of many passengers on a plane or walking busy city streets. These experiences involve both an awareness and a lack of awareness of others that surround us. A person can be so deep in thought that they are not able to take in

people around them, but are peripherally aware of the presence of others. Koch (1994) suggests that in solitude we live with the personal warmth stored in objects. People who are alone spend much of their time remembering, thinking about, or longing for others (Barbour, 2004).

Billions of people around the world use the Internet for everything from work and study, to entertainment and social interaction. Various services, apps and websites can be used to feel a sense of connectedness with others even while alone. The pervasive nature of constant electronic connectivity can take away from time available for quiet reflection, for time out from the constant flow of stimulation at our disposal every moment of the day (Salmon & Matarese, 2014). The Internet, computers and phones allow for a sense of control over when and how a person is connected or disconnected from others. More often than not we are able to be connected if we want or need, we can be anonymous in connection or have face-to-face interactions. With anonymity there is a sense of control, a user can represent themselves however they want, be it real, enhanced or completely fictional. Anonymity, along with the absence of social cues, often leads to greater disinhibition and more disclosure than is common in face-to-face interactions (Amichai-Hamburger & Schneider, 2014).

People may come to therapy with concerns around the effects of their level of connectedness to social media; the continuous exposure, over-comparing, and self-surveillance may be considered political sensibilities or social discourses that shape people's sense of self (McSkimming, 2016). Constant pressure to be present online leaves little time and space to be with oneself. Turkle (2015) explores how social media impacts our capacity to connect and empathize. The capacity for solitude allows us to

reach out to others, to see people as separate and independent. but when identity is controlled by the prevailing discourse of ‘I share, therefore I am’, solitude may become anxiety or a disconnection from a sense of self (Turkle, 2015).

Art and Creation

“There are days when solitude is heady wine that intoxicates you, others when it is a bitter tonic, and still others when it is a poison that makes you beat your head against the wall” – Colette (Freedom, 1908)

Creativity involves forming associations between previously unrelated ideas and giving expression to those associations in useful or valuable ways for the self or for others (Long & Averill, 2003). To harness this, artists of all types tend toward being removed from interacting with people and distractions of any kind, when engaging with their work. Much of art, literature, and philosophy is a product of being alone, often for long periods of time. Knafo (2012a) sees creativity as not an option but a natural response to being radically alone and needing contact and encounter to realize and enlarge oneself.

There is also a social connectivity in relationship with solitude and creativity. Artists usually need to work alone, but they are also communicating with and creating for others, for a reader, a listener, an audience. In his memoir, “The Invention of Solitude,” American author Paul Auster (1982) wrote:

Every book is an image of solitude, the outcome of a great deal of time spent alone in a room. Literature is at once the product of an author’s solitude and a means by which a reader reaches through his own and the author’s solitude. In reading, an isolated individual becomes absorbed in something beyond his own

preoccupations and communes with another mind. ... It is possible to be alone and not alone at the same time. Reading literature creates a kind of companionship that preserves the solitariness of reading and writing. (p. 136)

Artists may create for any number of personal reasons – pain, joy, trauma, love – and they most likely retreat to aloneness and quiet for creative output. What distinguishes artists from non-artists is their particular personal, historical, and psychological response to experience – artists can be so affected by experience that they seek solitude to create something that stands apart from experience (Knafo, 2012a). The cliché of the reclusive artist, clicking away with concentration at a keyboard in a quiet little room, or immersed in stroking paint onto a canvas in a stark studio closed off from the world, has been around for a long time. American novelist Philip Roth spent most of his days living and writing alone:

“I live alone, there's no one else to be responsible for or to, or to spend time with, Roth said. "My schedule is absolutely my own. Usually, I write all day, but if I want to go back to the studio in the evening, after dinner, I don't have to sit in the living room because someone else has been alone all day. I don't have to sit there and be entertaining or amusing. I go back out and I work for two or three more hours....If I get up at five and I can't sleep and I want to work, I go out and I go to work. So I work, I'm on call. I'm like a doctor and it's an emergency room. And I'm the emergency.” (Remnick, New Yorker, 2000)

Leonardo da Vinci believed that the artist ‘must be solitary and consider what he sees. He must converse with himself. He must select the quintessence of whatever he sees. He must act as a mirror that changes into as many colors as there are things placed

before it.' (Leonardo, 1959, in Caranfa, 2007). For DaVinci, the artist brings together, shapes and recreates the beauty of nature through contemplation, an expression of the divine.

Finding creative solutions to problems, or producing creative output, requires alonetime for the unconscious to process and unravel problems, to figure things out, to emerge with new discoveries, and to dig up new answers (Buchholz, 1997). It is not just the peace and quiet of being alone that allows for the deep thought and productivity involved in creative output. Solitude is seen as necessary to tap into and engage with the inner self. Creativity emerges from within, but what is deep within can be difficult to face. Obstacles such as fear, anxiety or depression can become overwhelming and make concentration and discipline extremely difficult. Because solitude is often connected with isolation, abandonment, and death, most people, including artists, fear solitary spaces or confronting difficult truths, but they do so in hopes that the risks will pay off (Knafo, 2012a).

Thoughts can arise while one is alone that can be uncomfortable or even painful, and the difficulty or inability to express them, equally so. Nors stated the following in regard to artistic discipline and the product of solitude;

Solitude, I think, heightens artistic receptivity in a way that can be challenging and painful. When you sit there, alone and working, you get thrown back on yourself. Your life and your emotions, what you think and what you feel, are constantly being thrown back on you. And then the "too much humanity" feeling is even stronger: you can't run away from yourself. You can't run away from your emotions and your memory and the material you're working on. Artistic solitude

is a decision to turn and face these feelings, to sit with them for long periods of time (Fassler, 2014).

Fromm-Reichmann (1959) suggested that a sense of solitude is an expression of creative loneliness, a state that is often self-induced and temporary, and where much creative and original work is produced. There is urgency to the feeling of loneliness or the potential for loneliness. In order to have free command over creativity, an individual must not fear this kind of constructive aloneness (Fromm-Reichmann, 1959).

As one of the most important philosophers and existential thinkers to date, Nietzsche (1844-1900) spent solitary summers in Switzerland producing classic works such as *Thus spoke Zarathustra* and *Beyond good and evil* (Fong, 2014). Through *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche viewed solitude as a place for meditation and reflection that will lead to the point where, upon being bloated with wisdom, one must leave the state and share with society the knowledge and insights acquired, a place to return for healing, and deleterious if one is not careful (Fong, 2014).

Fantasy, Daydream, and Imagination

An inner world of fantasy exists within every human being, and the interests in which imagination plays a part are as important as interpersonal relationships in giving meaning to many peoples lives (Storr, 1998). Anyone seeking to bring about new ideas and creation – artists, authors, scientists, philosophers – often stays away from social engagement to focus on their interior world. Whether for short or long periods of time, a mental, emotional and physical distance from others allows space to seek new thoughts, ideas and alternate realities through use of the imagination.

Imagination is generally seen as more active during childhood. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) found that adolescents who cannot tolerate being alone often fail to develop their creative talents because this kind of development usually relies on solitary activities – ie. practicing an instrument, drawing, or writing in a journal (Long & Averill, 2003). Time spent alone is also time spent playing, thinking and constructing imaginative worlds. The development of an imaginary world can sometimes serve as a retreat from unhappiness, a compensation for loss, and a basis for creative achievement (Storr, 1988). Being fully immersed in an interior world of multiple realities helps feed and develop artistic output. A vivid imagination and artistic pursuits can sometimes be a product of a lonely childhood, social rejection or isolation. A discrepancy that motivates creativity can be seen in creative individuals who are able to bridge the gap between their inner and outer worlds, linking the subjective and the objective (Storr, 1988). Many authors – Rudyard Kipling, Beatrix Potter, Emily Dickinson – developed their talents to create characters of intense intimate detail because they have spent many hours as children painfully alone (Storr, 1988).

Knafo (2012b) suggests that there are two basic derivatives of existential or radical solitude (ie. each of us is alone in our experience); enforced solitude and voluntary solitude. Enforced solitude – a form of incarceration imposed by others or self-imposed – while not preferable, can be just as generative as freely chosen, or voluntary, solitude. Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Wilde's *De Profundis*, and Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*, were all written in prison (Knafo, 2012b). French novelist Colette was locked in a room by her husband and only allowed out when she had written a required number of pages – her *Claudine* series was written under these conditions (Knafo, 2012a).

Western culture has been shaped so that women are expected to be nurturing caretakers who are more social and communicative, with little time or energy to spend on looking inward. Knafo, (2012b) suggests that experiences of solitude are different for women than for men, which has therefore influenced artistic output. In the past, time spent alone to improve oneself was considered a luxury and predominantly the domain of men. Solitude has implications of independence and self-reliance, a rite of passage, a search for adventure and knowledge, all the privilege of the male (Knafo, 2012b). For women, a passion or preference for solitude has been perceived as unnatural or dangerous, contrary to being a nurturer, and lacking in value (Koch, 1994).

Historically, journal writing has offered women a way to attune to their own experience and to express their creativity – diaries and letter writing were considered important works of solitude (Koch, 1994). Journals and letters were forms of literary art where women could be heard and taken seriously. Writing in a journal represents permission for solitude and allows a private work in a private voice – not only is it the result of generative solitude, it conveys the aesthetic aspects of women’s daily lives (Knafo, 2012a).

Woolf, in *A Room of One’s Own*, made a call for not only a place for women in literature, but also a physical space and freedom for women to write and create. A “room of one’s own,” was a place of refuge and renewal, a crucible of interiority for delight, surprise, and transformation (Knafo, 2012b).

Personal Transformation

To have time and space to breathe and reflect, to sit with one’s thoughts can be a common yet productive response to living in a busy and often overwhelming world.

Lewis (2009) suggests that we have a type of internal conversation that can have a strong capacity to bring about personal change during solitude, a space in which a person examines their own contradictions. For example, “Why did I say such a hurtful thing to the one I love?” “Why do I push myself so hard when I am completely exhausted?” These kinds of questions lead to personal dialogue and self-examination, and solitude offers the context for working through these types of challenges.

Solitude is an opportunity for reflection and emotional recharging. It is an experience and a process that may be able to counteract stress in a similar way to that of social support. By taking time out, those individuals who are able to use solitude for appraisal and emotional regeneration could be more resilient to stress, regardless of their relationships with others (Larson & Lee, 1996). Yalom (1980) theorized that the conditions of “solitude, silence, time, and the freedom from everyday distractions” (p.8) are necessary to allow for deep personal exploration on being a human being in the world. We are both fundamentally separate from others in the world and choosing to seek out physical and emotional separateness at the same time.

In examining the individual experience, Goffman (in Larson 1990), observed social norms that regulate interactions with others, and suggested that as a person enters the presence of other people, they are subject to social obligations that shape and inhibit interactions, such as being polite. While around other people, a person conforms to social and self-imposed pressures to put up a good front. Conversely, time alone might be identified as time “off stage,” freedom from the watchful eyes and demands of others (Larson, 1990).

Experiencing aloneness allows one to step outside the definition of self that has been assigned by peers or family, and may provide an important opportunity to develop a personally defined self (Larson, 1990). The people around us and the environments that we move in, contribute to who we are – sister, student, customer etc. Storr (1989) posits that, through solitude, we can remove ourselves from the people and objects that define and confirm our identities. Through time spent alone we are able to look at ourselves more deeply and in a different light. A type of creativity and use of the imagination that can be facilitated by solitude comes when exploring who one is and how one moves in the world. This can be done by trying out different identities – exploring alternative selves through creative changes in a person’s self-concept and its related thoughts, feelings, and actions (Long & Averill, 2003).

The notion of freedom is an integral aspect of choosing to be alone, but is not as straight forward as it may seem. For the purposes of simplifying an aspect of the complicated philosophical idea of freedom; there is a negative *freedom from* constraints, and a positive *freedom to* engage in desired activities because of the presence of the necessary resources (Long & Averill, 2003). Philip Koch (1994) offers an example of negative freedom afforded by solitude – by simply being in the presence of others, we are obliged to coordinate our experience with theirs, and our subjective experience is influenced by even a brief interaction with another person. For example, ones’ experience of viewing a painting in a gallery changes when another person walks up; one becomes conscious not only of what is being looked at, but also of oneself as a viewer (Long & Averill, 2003). Being in solitude can help decrease self-consciousness. Solitude allows for an individual to focus on their life and their experiences with greater

attention and fuller focus. Csikszentmihalyi (1991) states, “unless one learns to tolerate and even enjoy being alone, it is very difficult to accomplish any task that requires undivided concentration” (p. 165).

Meditation and Mindfulness

In the context of our modern busy lives, for phones to stop buzzing, alerts to stop pinging, horns to stop honking and the chattering of everyone around us to cease, seems next to impossible. To be in silence offers an opportunity to be still, to listen and to open ourselves to new possibilities from both the outside world and from within ourselves. Silence, calm, stillness and quiet are not always necessary for the experience of solitude, but they are helpful.

Mindfulness can be defined as a state of consciousness marked by present-moment, nonjudgmental awareness, and solitude can be seen as a similar self-contained state of mind (Salmon & Matarese, 2014). Mindfulness practices offer the opportunity to go inward and present an opportunity for concentration and awareness around emotions, thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness meditation involves cultivating a state of nonreactive awareness that includes both inner experience and the outer world - awareness of one’s world can be a valuable therapeutic attribute because it helps develop an appreciation for the constant flow of stimulation we experience every day (Salmon & Matarese, 2014).

Spiritual Considerations

Particularly in the Western world, spirituality refers to the personal and experiential aspects of religion, as opposed to the doctrines, institutions and rituals of organized religious communities (Barbour, 2014). Solitude can help with understanding

and providing a feeling of connectedness to what provides meaning and value in an individual's life. Ancient Christian monks thought of solitude as paradise, a place where the full mystery of God became manifest, but also a place where deep terrors within could be unleashed and uncontrollable (Burton-Christie, 2006). The terms "monastery" and "monk" come from the same Greek work for "alone" or "single" (Buchholz, 1997). There is a common accusation against spiritual or religious people who seek solitude that it is an egotistical pursuit. Merton (1915-1968), a trappist monk who lived in and wrote extensively about solitude, explored its potential to express solidarity and love for others, and as a symbol of unity with God. Merton defended the practice of solitude as a setting for a life of contemplation and prayer, but also questioned his motivations, as a way to discern whether his desire to be alone might reflect selfishness or misanthropy (Barbour, 2014).

Looking at solitude and spirituality cross-culturally, Averill and Sundararajan (2014) reported on a study that explored possible differences in solitude experiences among Chinese and American university students. With cultural and language differences, it was found that spiritual pursuits for Chinese students are usually specified in concrete terms rather than in abstractions – *spirituality* was expanded on with *harmony* (a sense of unity with one's surrounding) and *self-transcendence* (surpassing everyday distinctions and concerns). These terms can be used to expand and add layers to ideas around beneficial solitude in spiritual dimensions.

Contemplation is often described as a preferred way to achieve spiritual peace and closeness to god – Saturday, or Shabbat in Judaism, a day of rest – was traditionally a time to contemplate one's life and the scriptures (Buchholz, 1997). Quakers use

collective silence as a powerful religious occasion combining aspects of solitary and communal experience, and the religious insights of healers and shamans in Native American spirituality were often the result of a solitary vigil (Barbour, 2014).

Healing found in solitude can also be a spiritual experience. Immersion in the emotions of grief and sorrow and confrontation with the reality of loss, separation, and ending, can help with coming to terms with bereavement (Barbour, 2014). Respite or refuge from social interaction allows inner healing powers the chance to restore health and well-being. Merton believed in the power of rest for healing, in solitude one can experience self-care and self-regulation and gain an inner peace and direction (Buchholz, 1997).

In Nature

For some, solitude plays a large role in absorbing the power and beauty of the natural world. As much a cliché as the solitary artist at work; heading off into the wilderness is equally synonymous with the pursuit of solitude. For most people, the ideal place for seeking solitude is in some aspect of the natural environment. More specifically, going to a beach, a mountaintop, a river or lake, a forest or the woods (Long & Averill, 2003). Nature is one of the main values sought in solitude – a sublime landscape taken in by a solitary observer offers insight into the human place in a vast and powerful universe and a desire to be a part of or worship that which transcends humanity (Barbour, 2004).

Koch (1994) distinguishes three ways to find value in solitary experience in nature: facilitating clear perception, symbolic perception, and the sense of fusion with nature. American writer Thoreau (1817-1862) and his book *Walden* (1854) are the

epitome the American experience of solitude in the natural world. Thoreau is seen as a national conscience for the US, he is the voice in the American wilderness, urging people to be true to themselves and to live in harmony with nature (Shulz, 2015). The following quotes from Walden encapsulate what is most idealized about the notion of solitude and being in nature: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately.” “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!”

Natural environments are often perceived as restorative. Environmental psychological literature uses the term *restoration* to refer to the physiological, psychological, and social processes through which person–environment interactions effect change from prior negative states or environmental contexts to more positive ones (Hartig, 2004, in Korpela & Staats, 2014). Being in a pleasant and natural setting offers the opportunity for people to clear their minds without the pressures of social demands. People report that with a sense of being away from the civilized world (even in close proximity to a city), it is like an escape to a world outside of usual daily life, there is a feeling of relaxation, reflection, and a sense of peacefulness within themselves (Schroeder, 2002).

Conclusion

Solitude can be both a retreat from unwanted social interactions and a commitment to positive values and dimensions of reality that are more fully experienced alone (Barbour, 2014). Solitude is not necessarily just about paying attention to oneself, but a kind of focus or attentiveness to thoughts, feelings and activities that is difficult to achieve in a busy and distracting world. Be it through creativity, meditation, spirituality or being immersed in nature, solitude and the awareness it can facilitate, allows for

greater connection and participation with personal meanings and truths, both internally and out in the world, that matter most.

Chapter Four: Developing Solitude

When a person engages in an experience of solitude, whether they are able to benefit from it or it causes them to suffer, very much depends on their unique internal resources. The capacity to engage in solitary activities may reflect feeling secure about one's attachments (as evidenced in classic developmental research (Bowlby, 1969), or an interpersonal style that corresponds to one's nature (Herbst, Leary & McCrary, 2003). On average, outside of child-rearing years, a person will experience more and more time alone as they get older (Larson, 1990). Personality characteristics and reaching developmental milestones help with one's chances to make constructive use of time spent away from others. How solitude is perceived and the meanings that are attached to it, may also play a role. Who has the capacity to be alone, to be separate, and feel comfortable or safe in that separateness and why? The following will look at positive experiences of solitude across the life span and how a capacity to be alone, a preference for solitude, or an affinity for aloneness might come to be.

Developmental Factors

Childhood. Individual differences in preference for solitude, or the ability to benefit from time spent alone, may begin from a very young age. Winnicott's (1958) conception of the capacity to be alone – a theoretical touchstone for solitude research – plays a large role in his developmental theory, and specifically in subsequent research on the benefits of solitude. The nature of the relationship between infant and mother or caregiver was considered very important as Winnicott (1958) suggested the capacity to be alone develops within that relationship. Infants who were free to explore independently and occupy themselves, while at the same time in the security of their caregiver's

presence, will, as adults, have the capacity to be alone (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014). Winnicott's (1958) theory therefore constitutes a paradox – the experience of being alone as a small child, while at the same time being in the presence of the caregiver (Galanaki, 2014). The capacity to be alone can therefore be seen as less about disconnection or separation, and more along the lines of connection and attachment. Averill and Sundararajan (2014) build on this paradox, and state that the capacity for solitude depends on the ability to preserve a sense of community while alone. When very young, this community may not extend much beyond the caregiver, but as a person ages, their community grows.

Learning to “play well with others” is one of the primary social goals of early childhood development (Hay, Caplan, & Nash, 2009). Solitude is most often viewed as a negative experience in childhood and associated with terms such as social withdrawal, shyness, avoidant, or socially anxious. Terms such as *unsociable* or *socially disinterested* may have negative connotations, so the term *preference for solitude* is used to stress the fact that some children have interests of their own that they prefer to pursue in solitary activities rather than spending time with others (Goossens, 2014). Children have a low-to-moderate ability to be alone as being alone is not usually voluntary, and children who play alone are often treated as idle, naughty, or deviant (Larson, 1990, Buchholz & Helbraun, 1999). Nevertheless, certain types of solitary play can serve various important developmental needs for young children (Buchholz & Helbraun, 1999). For example, the constructive component of solitary play – ie. playing with blocks or drawing – are thought to contribute to children's learning about spatial concepts, proportion, and mathematics (Ness & Farenga, 2007). While learning to play alone can offer important

developmental opportunities for young children, excessive solitary behavior in the presence of potential playmates has generally been regarded as maladaptive (Coplan & Ooi, 2014).

From a psychoanalytical perspective, Galanaki (2014) relates the fear of abandonment and separation anxiety with a fear of solitude. Separation anxiety arises when there is a loss, or the threat of a loss, of relationship with a significant other; loneliness is a kind of separation distress that results from basic attachment needs not being met (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014). Essentially it is a fear of abandonment, a fear of being left alone. Freud (1905/1953, as quoted in Galanaki, 2014) wrote that “anxiety in children is originally nothing other than an expression of the fact that they are feeling the loss of the person they love” (p. 224) and viewed solitude and loneliness as connected to our first anxiety experiences. From the beginning of life, the ability to cope with separation anxiety will lessen the fear of solitude and vice versa: the outcome of the capacity to be alone may be an equally tolerable anxiety over separation and loss (Galanaki, 2014).

Winnicott’s (1958) view of the capacity to be alone can be taken further through considering attachment theory. At the core of Bowlby’s (1969) theory of attachment is the idea that human beings are born with a psychobiological system - the attachment behavioral system – that motivates the seeking of proximity to significant others or attachment figures in times of need, to maintain adequate protection and support, and a subjective sense of safety and security. Attachment theory and solitude may seem dichotomous – with attachment, the quality of relationships determines well-being, and well-being is also a result of quality time spent alone (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014). It has

been suggested that a positive experience of solitude is only possible when one is securely attached, and secure attachment requires the potential for aloneness (Detrixhe, Samstag, Penn & Wong, 2014).

Interpersonal neurobiology pulls from more than a dozen different disciplines of science to paint a picture of human experience and the process of development and change across the lifespan, it can be used to offer helpful definitions of the mind and of mental well-being (Siegel, 2001). In examining mind development across the lifespan, the orbitofrontal region of the brain is central for a number of processes such as emotion regulation, empathy, and autobiographical memory; its development depends upon the nature of interactions with attachment figures during the early years of life (Siegel, 2001). These are the parts of the brain responsible for emotional and social functioning and they are influenced by both genetics and life experiences.

Buchholz and Helbraun (1999) see the need for togetherness or attachment to be as significant to well-being as the need for aloneness. They argue that the need for solitude begins in the womb, it is biologically based and psychologically warranted, parallel and equal to the need for attachment. If there were no need for alone space, an infant would have no way of finding contented quiet in sleep or awake moments (Buchholz & Helbraun, 1999).

Tying together these two theories as more complimentary than competing, Holmes (2001) states that Bowlby and Winnicott see the same central paradox from different angles:

Bowlby and Winnicott saw in different ways the central paradox that one can only be securely separate if one feels attached in the first place. For Winnicott (1958),

the infant develops the capacity for solitude if he has been allowed to “be alone in the presence of the mother.” Bowlby’s mother provides the secure base from which the child can go out and explore the world (Holmes, 2001, p. 138).

Early learning is not our first experience with being alone, according to Buchholz and Helbraun (1999), it is reinforcement of an inherent ability – a need for alone time is psychobiologically based and has its roots in intrauterine experience. We are born with survival skills that contribute to the development of both relatedness and being alone. Some of the same physiological behaviours that represent attachment, such as sucking and grasping, can be integrated into the notion of developing the capacity for being alone, self-soothing, and survival (Buchholz & Helbraun, 1999).

Adolescence. Aloneness takes on more complex meanings as we age. Younger children have a limited understanding of the differences among the concepts of objective, painful, and beneficial aloneness, but this understanding increases dramatically from the beginning of childhood until the beginning of adolescence (Galanaki, 2005). The adolescent developmental period refers to ages 10–22 years and is often described as a period of developmental change and transition connecting childhood and adulthood (Bowker, Nelson, Markovic & Luster, 2014). There are significant developmental differences within that age bracket, particularly around perceptions of time spent alone. Younger and older adolescents have different ideas about solitude - the older the child, the less likely they are to see loneliness as simply just being by oneself. Solitude is viewed more negatively in early adolescence, where time alone is seen as aversive, and withdrawn behaviors as negative (Larson, 1990). Wang et al., (2013) found that preference for solitude was more strongly associated with maladjustment for younger

adolescents than for older adolescents. Specifically, it was associated with greater anxiety and depression, emotional dysregulation, and lower self-esteem for those in grade 8, but not those in grade 12. One reason for this may be that older adolescents are generally granted more independence and behavioral autonomy than younger adolescents and older adolescents may have more freedom to enjoy their solitude – ie. to go places by themselves – which may contribute to greater well-being (Wang et al., 2013).

In later adolescence solitude becomes more acceptable and tolerable, older adolescents spend more time alone compared to when they were younger, and report experiencing solitude as a more positive and significant experience (Coplan & Weeks, 2010, Wang et. al, 2013). Older teenagers become more appreciative of the benefits of solitude – such as more freedom and privacy – and find it has a constructive purpose in their lives (Larson, 1997). Older adolescents reported feeling much less self-conscious when alone. Time spent away from others can help release the adolescent from their public self, giving them a break from trying to present as being more happy than they really feel on the inside, a break from being judged (Larson, 1990). Matters become more complicated in the current youth culture that emphasizes constant connection and display of a public self through mobile phones and social media. For some, time alone with potential for online access and connection may be comforting, for others, it is a source of distress, including feelings of loneliness (Ruiz-Casares, 2012).

During later adolescence, time alone begins to have more conscious and deliberate functions, such as the important developmental tasks of individuation and identity formation (Goossens, 2014). Identity development has been seen as an important part of adolescence and emerging adulthood (Erikson, 1968) as young people are

exploring who they are and the role they play in the world. It is a time of possibility and a time for searching. Adolescents are involved with redefining their relationships with parents and peers, moving away from dependence on their family and spending more energy on the building social networks with peers – finding ways to be connected but also apart in order to define a separate sense of self (Majorano, Musetti, Brondino & Corsano, 2015). Time in solitude allows the space for concentration, self-reflection and processing the changes young people are going through. That young people have a sense of control over the time that they spend alone, and do not feel forced by themselves, may be a key factor in explaining any positive effects of solitude (Goossens, 2014).

Solitude presents adolescents with a paradox: it can be boring and lonely and too much of it may be detrimental; yet it also offers opportunity for an escape from the intense social pressures adolescents can experience, and time for exploration of one's private self (Larson, 1990). Coming to terms with this paradox is symbolic of adjustment and finding a balance between their public and private selves (Larson, 1990). Because adolescence is also a key time for relatedness, it is important for young people to find a balance between socializing and autonomy.

Older adolescents may also experience solitude more positively than younger adolescents because they have developed advanced reasoning skills to make more constructive use of solitude, they experience increased social self-consciousness and pressure to conform, and time alone provides a unique opportunity to process the pressing issues of identity formation (Long & Averill, 2003).

Adulthood. For adults, a sense of comfort in spending time alone corresponds with fewer negative physical symptoms, lower levels of sadness, and higher life

satisfaction (Larson & Lee, 1996), along with less frequent experiences of boredom and loneliness (Burger, 1995). Larson et al. (1990) suggest that “to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by solitude, a person must be able to turn a basically terrifying state of being into a productive one” (p. 52). How time away from others affects a person depends on the extent to which they prefer to spend time alone. Burger (1995) created the Preference for Solitude Scale to assess an individual’s preference and tolerance of spending time alone. The scale posits that people differ along a continuum from those with a very high preference for solitude to those with a very low preference. The Preference for Solitude Scale tends to focus on underlying motivations for being alone and is more often used in research focused on children (Goossens, 2014). The term *affinity for aloneness* is used in solitude research with both adolescents and adults as a somewhat broader and more inclusive term than *preference for solitude* (Goossens, 2014). Preference for solitude can be interpreted more simply as choosing to be by oneself more than being social, and is usually used in relation to pathological forms of social withdrawal. Where as *affinity for aloneness* is more about an attraction, a closeness, or a relationship with solitude. This elaboration and differentiation allows for a more nuanced look at solitude in older adolescents and adults, they are choosing to be alone for various reasons and have many different meanings and connections to solitude.

The attachment system is active over the life span. People of all ages are able to become emotionally attached to a variety of relationship partners in times of need as secure bases to explore and develop interpersonal skills (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment styles are seen as individual differences in attachment-system functioning, and show patterns of expectations, emotions, and behaviors in relationships that result from

internalizing a particular history of attachment experiences (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014). Two negative attachment styles that are relevant to experiences of aloneness are attachment anxiety and attachment-related avoidance. These attachment insecurities can lead to low-quality, unstable relationships that can easily result in feelings of loneliness (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014). Those who are more securely attached are generally thought of as being better able to enjoy and benefit from solitude. People who are securely attached (low avoidance and low anxiety toward close relationships) feel more freedom to surrender themselves in solitude to deeper connection with the self, and a passionate commitment outside of the self, be it to God, an ideology, a lover, or a creative muse (Long et al., 2003).

Winnicott (1958) describes the capacity to be alone as being closely related to emotional maturity – adults who possess the capacity to be alone and to prosper in solitude were able to “rest contented even in the absence of external objects and stimuli (p. 32).” Whether it is a partner, a friend, a phone, social media, or television, there is no need for distraction from one’s thoughts or feelings. It has been suggested that those who dislike and mistrust being alone with themselves reflect a kind of self-aversion, or the flight from self because of the inability to endure one’s own company – the ability to be critically and yet self-amicably alone with oneself is what solitude demands (McGraw, 2010). There is a belief in safety and comfort when alone and this achievement is understood as the product of having internalized stable and secure representations of self with others (Meehan et al., 2014).

Winnicott (1958) proposed that psychological health in adulthood requires an ability to be separate from others and yet maintain “ego-relatedness,” to be alone without

succumbing to impulse, loneliness, or fear. The capacity to be alone reflects an integration of the public and private self, a capacity to maintain a sense of personal constancy that is independent of immediate social reinforcement (Larson, 1990). To benefit from solitude, a person must be able to draw on internal resources to find meaning in a situation in which external supports are lacking – this could explain why many people, when alone, engage in distracting rather than productive activities (Long & Averill, 2003).

As we move into old age, being alone seems to become easier. It is less likely to bring feelings of painful separation from others, starting in the adolescent years there is decreasing aversion to solitude and later on, a greater pleasure is found in solitary activities by older than younger adults (Larson, 1990). Adults have reported greater ease of concentration when alone, and older adults reported a greater sense of control (Larson, 1990). Age, marital status, and occupation contribute to the amount of time a person spends alone or in solitude. Larson et al. (1982) found that unmarried adults with no children, spent more time alone than did other adults. Also, that adults with semi-skilled jobs experienced more solitude than did adults in more skilled jobs.

The connection between adults who are single, with a love of solitude, has not yet been fully explored. There are indications that those who stay single are more introverted than those who marry (DePaulo, 2014). Much of the balance between time spent alone and socializing can depend on our living situation.

People who live alone may have more options to spend more time alone, whereas those who live with others may have more access to easy sociability. People who live alone in cities can walk out the door and see other people on the streets, but

people who share a house can walk out their bedroom doors and see other people in the hallways, kitchen, and living room (DePaulo, 2014).

How we find ways to enjoy solitude or avoid it depends greatly on how we live.

Klinenberg (2016) states that living alone offers a way to achieve restorative solitude as well as the freedom, and the personal time and space that we might need to make deep and meaningful social connections – whether with another person, a community, a cause, or our selves.

Neural plasticity, or the change in neural connectivity induced by experience, may be the fundamental way in which psychotherapy alters the brain (Siegel, 2001). The mind develops across our lifespan as the genetically programmed maturation of the nervous system is shaped by our ongoing experiences (Siegel, 2001). Our brains and our minds depend on both nature and nurture. Each of our significant life experiences involves the activation of neural activity in the moment, and can potentially shape the continually changing structure of the brain – this suggests that the brain remains open to continuing influences from the environment (Siegel, 2001). This potential for change offers hope and possibilities for those who may not have had secure attachment experiences in childhood. Attachment classifications developed in the early years of life may shift and change due to the ability of the brain to continue to grow and respond to outside experiences (Siegel, 2001). Through this, a person may be able to develop a greater capacity for time spent alone and therefore gain from its benefits. While we are not able to control or change what happened to us as children, neural plasticity offers hope for change and that we can learn to better manage our lives as adults.

Personality Correlates

There have been few attempts to explain why some people are prone to solitude or desire it, and why some are able to benefit from solitude while others are not. The studies that have asked these questions (Burger, 1995; Larson, 1990; Larson & Lee, 1996), have proposed that an affinity for solitude is correlated with personality type. Personality is complex and dynamic, it is in constant interaction with biological predispositions, schemas of self and other, affective and behavioral patterns, and the demands of the outside world (Meehan et al., 2014). Leary et al. (2003) examined whether a person's tendency to seek out solitude was a personality trait or a temporary desire to not interact with others. It was found that both factors predicted whether a person might seek solitude, whether they were predisposed to be alone or because they were overwhelmed and needed time to themselves. There is no simple formula or list of requirements to determine who has an affinity for spending time alone.

Among the “Big Five” personality traits (extraversion-introversion, openness, neuroticism, agreeableness, and conscientiousness), an affinity for solitude is strongly correlated with introversion and more modestly with neuroticism (Burger, 1995). The most commonly addressed personality dimensions when considering time spent alone, are introversion and extroversion. Introverts tend to be more reserved, timid, and quiet, while extroverts are often social, talkative, and bold (Zelenski, Sobocko & Whelan, 2014). Much of the research connecting extraversion and happiness is conducted in Western cultures that value individualism and assertiveness (particularly true in the United States); the pattern might be different in cultures that place greater value on thoughtfulness, passivity, and quiet reflection (Zelenski et al., 2014).

The quality of one's internal resources and unique personality features gained throughout development, is central in determining whether one is able to endure and benefit from the experience of being alone (Mehan et al., 2014). According to personality research, a person who has a stable preference for the occasional time spent alone, and who is open to new emotional experiences, is set up to enjoy the benefits of solitude (Long & Averill, 2003).

In Relation

“But many of us seek community solely to escape the fear of being alone. Knowing how to be solitary is central to the art of loving. When we can be alone, we can be with others without using them as a means of escape.” — bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions*

The positive freedom to engage in a particular activity requires more than simply a freedom from constraint or interference: it also requires the resources or capacity to use solitude constructively (Long & Averill, 2003). Chua & Koestner (2008) found that the relation of solitary activities to feelings of loneliness and life satisfaction depends on whether people feel autonomous (volitional and self-endorsed behaviors), rather than controlled (pressured by external or internal forces) about spending time alone.

What separates positive experiences of solitude from a potential for loneliness, appears to come down to choice. What is referred to as *authentic solitude* is usually based on making the decision to be alone; conversely, pseudo-solitude, which can bring about loneliness, involves a sense of abandonment or unwanted isolation (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014). Choice is not something that suddenly occurs, it has a history and a self who chooses, it is sensitive to circumstances, and leads to consequences (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014). Building on this sense of choice and freedom to be alone, to

willingly choose to seek out solitude, presents growth opportunities and possibilities for those who fear being alone.

An affinity for solitude does not always mean a rejection of the positive aspects of social interaction or social support. A capacity for solitude relies on the ability to maintain a sense of community and connection while alone. Society is not the only way that humans can serve their needs as relational beings; other types of constructions include connection to the self, virtual communities with God, with nature, and sometimes with inanimate objects or animals (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014). In solitude, a person can be supported by the introjected presence of a real or imagined person (Modell, 1993). For example, one might rely on the supportive imagined presence of a loved one, or an artist might rely on an imaginary muse, or simply on art itself. In this way, a solitary person can avoid loneliness, anxiety, and boredom by relying either on supportive relationships or on the absorbing nature of a passionate interest or commitment (Long and Averill, 2003).

The capacity to be alone is not just the ability to be alone and be comfortable, but to also share the experience of aloneness or solitude while in the presence of another. To understand solitude we must also understand relationship. There is a misconception around the self and community as being mutually exclusive. This dichotomy suggests that the self cannot be relational without community; from this perspective individuals who choose to be alone might be seen as deviant because they do not need social relationships, or like they are doomed to be lonely, since their need for intimacy will not be satisfied in solitude (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014). We are never completely alone

when solitude is authentic; even when we are alone, we are orienting ourselves to other people (Wachtel, 2008).

Conclusion

Solitude can be a powerful psychological state that some people are more prone to experience or to desire. Both genetics and life experience play a role in how our brains evolve and adjust to be better equipped to feel safe in relation to others and to ourselves when we are alone. To make the best use of solitude requires a successful negotiation of the attachment processes as an infant, the development of advanced reasoning skills, and gaining the propensity for reflexive thought, as influenced by previous social interactions (Long & Averill, 2003).

Chapter Five: Summary and Reflection

It is good to be solitary, for solitude is difficult; that something is difficult must be one more reason for us to do it.--Rainer Maria Rilke, "Letter to a Young Poet" (1903)

The primary aim of this thesis was to explore the positive psychology of solitude. An important aspect of this was to distinguish it from the pathology and negative connotations of concepts such as loneliness, disconnection, isolation and alienation. The secondary aim was examine how humans experience solitude for greater wellbeing, and what innate ability or learned skills it takes to profit from time spent alone.

There is evidence that we are born with the need for time alone, that we possess an innate system that, with nurturing and experience, can develop a capacity to be alone; and we may also learn those skills, and in turn, become comfortable and productive in solitude (Buchholz, 1997). We can learn ways to seek out and gain from time alone, just as we can learn to be attached and thrive in relationship. We can also adapt to simply endure time spent alone, to accept it as a neutral and normal part of life, and distract ourselves until we are back in the company of others. With distraction we can avoid loneliness, but we also avoid connection with ourselves.

How we view solitude is very much tied up with the meanings we attach to the experience of being alone. Whether we experience time alone negatively as loneliness, or positively through solitude, primarily comes down to a sense of control. Time alone as a result of our own free choice is bound to be more beneficial.

Just as there are dimensions within relationships, there are dimensions within solitude: levels of self-discovery, flight, return, fear, longing, fantasy, introspection, communion, and silence (Knafo, 2012a). Creativity plays a large role in how time alone

is maximized. Be it creative output through art or creative insight into ourselves through introspection, in taking the time think, process and see things in new ways there is potential for personal transformation.

Solitude offers an opportunity to build on our relationships with others and with ourselves – solitude experiences and relationships with others are interdependent states, both of which are important parts of being human (Davies, 1996). Therefore, time alone allows us to appreciate being alone and can positively impact our interpersonal relationships. These two needs, when well realized and balanced, go a long way in offering a sense of security, mastery and freedom (Buchholz & Helbraun, 1999).

Looming on the other side of the positive experiences of time spent alone, is loneliness. For some, this is a cause for avoidance, dread and fear. Thoughts, feelings, and internal voices and intuitions are often shoved aside or drowned out by the noise of our interactions with others. In solitude we can tune into our inner selves and become aware of our deepest needs and feelings. This could uncover overwhelming thoughts and emotions and result in a strong desire to avoid being alone.

School age children were found to be able to identify many beneficial aspects of being alone: peace, quietude, and relaxation; decrease of anxiety, tension, and anger; opportunities for reflection, which can help with working through problems, understand faults, and find solutions; planning ahead; gaining a sense of self-reliance, self-control, and mastery; independence; the opportunity for privacy and secrecy and time to daydream and write in a diary; being pleasantly occupied with something; concentration; freedom to do things good or “bad”; learning the importance of human relationships (Galanaki, 2005). All of these benefits of solitude are very similar to those identified

during adulthood by Long et al. (2003): anonymity, creativity, diversion, inner peace, intimacy, problem solving, self-discovery, and spirituality (Galanaki, 2005). With this in mind, it is important to address the confusion, stigma and biases around solitude and loneliness from a young age.

Being physically close to other humans and relating to them socially is seen in Western culture as a remedy for loneliness (Rokach, 2004). Commonly held ideas of how to avoid loneliness include, improving social skills, enhancing social support, increasing opportunities for social contact, and addressing maladaptive social cognition (Masi, Chen, Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2011). Davies (1996) emphasized the importance of teaching people skills to effectively be alone. He argued that western culture is currently focused on developing social networks, and as a result, people are adapting to be connected to others.

To combat loneliness requires a journey to the self, not more socializing. The capacity to be alone is linked with self-discovery and self-acceptance; it is a process of coming to terms with our inner self, bringing about a sense of peace. Such discovery takes time, solitude and aloneness; it is a process of learning (Paterson, Blashko & Janzen, 1991, p. 275).

Almost every aspect of our lives is impacted by technology and constant connection. It seems especially important now to look at how therapists may collaborate with clients to find a sense of a personal private space, and explore the possibilities of creative contemplation and expression that may come from it (McSkimming, 2016).

Future Research

Any judgments we make about what is healthy or pathological cannot be separated from the culture that shapes our values and expectations and defines what is desirable and what is not (Knafo, 2012b). The way that solitude is valued and experienced differs across ethnic, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, further research could examine how solitude can be used to best address and benefit those from diverse populations. A study around solitude that takes place within the therapeutic framework would be helpful – perhaps around developing solitude skills within the relationship between therapist and client.

A deeper understanding of what it means for an individual to be alone and how a person uses solitude would be helpful. While it is difficult to conduct qualitative research into the lived experience of those who benefit from time spent alone as it invades privacy, it may enable therapists to have a richer view of their clients' internal experience. Stories of solitude come from the stories a culture provides around the meaning and significance of solitude - we always have a choice in the stories we tell, if not in the circumstances in which we find ourselves (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014). The positive psychology of solitude comes down to choice.

Personal Reflection

In writing this thesis, it was hard not to live it. As someone who identifies as an introvert, a lover of silence (or at the very least, low volume), and reveler in time spent alone, this topic was also a selfish pursuit. It was a not-so-veiled attempt to explore and validate my own affinity for solitude. My interests at the beginning of the research process revolved mainly around introversion and creativity in solitude, as well as

existential solitude – which I discovered was more in line with a Master’s in Philosophy thesis, so quickly moved away from. I also felt a resistance to what seems to me as a constant cultural discourse around the necessity of community and connection coupled with a stigma attached to those who thrive on spending time alone. This is particularly relevant to me as a single woman in her 40’s without children, who has lived alone for several years.

The most surprising discovery for me in this process, causing a complete shift in perspective, was the importance of relationship and community in connection with solitude. It is obvious to me now, but without relationship we simply cease to exist. In considering this, meaningful solitude for me now comes from having time and space to look inward, to think, read, run, be, create and imagine, both alone and with others.

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