Self-regulatory Solitude: A Qualitative Exploration of Subjective Experience in Indian Youth

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ABSTRACT

Solitude has often been confused with co-existing affective states of 'loneliness' and 'aleness' (Long et al., 2003). A growing body of literature (Nguyen et al., 2018) has quantitatively explored existing drives, affective outcomes and determinants of experience of solitude. Despite extensive research, a comprehensive conceptualization of solitude is yet to be achieved. Therefore, the current study qualitatively explores the subjective definition of solitude, individual experiences and the purposes behind seeking solitude through 10 semi-structured interviews with Bangalore you (24-28 years). Through thematic analysis, the study found that participants differed (social avoidance, self-regulation, productivity) in their purpose behind seeking solitude and the solitary activities that they engaged in. The role of space and agency in the experience of solitude was also highlighted. The study discusses the subjective experience of solitude in relation to existing literature and holds important implications regarding the use of solitude as a tool for affective self-regulation.

Keywords: solitude, self regulation, thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

Existing literature has vastly identified time spent alone, related affective experiences and individual differences in the experience of solitude through quantitative measures. One of the earliest explorations of solitude marked it as a mechanism of coping and emotional release among adolescents (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982). In adults, Nguyen and colleagues (2018) identified a deactivation effect of affect during time spent alone. Over time, the narrative of solitude being an abnormal social phenomenon (e.g. Coplan & Bowker, 2013; Goossens et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2013) has been replaced with one that acknowledges its links to well-being.

However, solitude remains semantically conflicted within existing literature. With overlapping conceptualization with factors such as social isolation, loneliness (Coplan & Bowker, 2013) and/or the usage of a socio-spatial perspective (i.e. solitude as a private event) to explain the phenomenon, a subjective conceptualization of solitude is lacking. Primarily, the use of quantitative research methodologies has established a cause-effect relationship between alone time and its affective/biological outcomes (Lay et al., 2018; Pauly et al., 2017), without exploring situational and individual determinants of solitude-seeking. Therefore, the current study employs a qualitative approach to explore the subjective conceptualization of solitude, solitary activities and the purpose behind seeking solitude.

Defining Solitude

Although humans are predominantly social creatures (Argyle, 1987), the act of ‘taking time alone/apart’ from a social group is a grossly under-explored phenomenon. Researchers have taken eclectic approaches to the conceptualization of solitude.

Within philosophical literature, Thoreau (1981) and Byrd (Storr, 1993) describe

solitude as “*being profoundly alone in the universe*”. Koch (1994) additionally highlights the mental and social disengagement that is core to the experience of solitude. In his view, solitude encompasses a range of disengaged activities, including social withdrawal for reflection to a complete immersion in a spectrum of human emotions and sensations.

Within psychological literature, solitude is a mental state that includes aspects of self-reflection, introspection and well-being. Existing literature has consistently found links between solitude and mental self-restoration activities such as introspection, self-reflection, self-regulation of affective experiences and the discovery of our authentic selves (Hollenhorst & Jones, 2001; C Long R., 2000; C. R. Long & Averill, 2003). Currently, solitude literature has separated itself from overlapping definitions with phenomenon such as social isolation and loneliness. A growing body of literature ideates solitude as a voluntarily activated mental state for the sole purpose of inner/outer-directed psychological experiences. By taking time out alone, an individual is able to understand their own moral values and authentic selves better (inner-directed focus) which can be appropriately employed towards future decisions and behaviours (outer-directed focus) (Long et al., 2007; Pederson, 1997)

Within this article, solitude is defined as the ‘psychological experience of being alone’ (Larson, 1990; Nguyen et al., 2018). With semantically diverse intellection of solitude, we aim to qualitatively explore a subjective definition of solitude.

What Happens During Solitude?

Poets (such as Thoreau & Beatrix Potter) and artists across time have been known to engage in solitude for creative purposes (France, 1996; Storr, 1993). Research finds that American individuals spend between 17% (elementary school children) to 48% (retired adults) of their time alone (Larson et al., 1985; Larson, 1990). In American adults, 86% of solitude time is voluntary (Lay et al., 2018) and is often sought to escape social pressures and

engage in relaxation activities (Long & Averill, 2003; Pauly et al., 2017). With evidence on the proliferous usage of solitude, solitary activities have been under explored as an area of research.

Solitude has been extensively linked to affective experiences. In experiments conducted by Larson and colleagues (Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1978; Larson, 1990, 1997), a decrease in positive affect is often found when people spend time alone. In a follow-up exploration, Nguyen et al. (2018) reported a deactivation effect on people's affective experiences of solitude. While such a deactivation effect was noted for high valence positive (e.g. excitement) and negative affect (e.g. anger), it was not seen with low valence negative (e.g. loneliness) or positive affect (e.g. relaxation). Instead, they found that solitude could lead to feelings of relaxation and reduced stress when people engaged in it voluntarily. Evidence finds that agency plays an important role in the experience of solitude, with people perceiving their time alone as positive if it was chosen of their own volition (Lay et al., 2018). While such literature establishes a cause-effect relationship between time spent alone and resulting changes in affect, little is known about activities that individuals actively engage in or the situational motivation factors that lead to such changes.

The Current Study

Therefore, in the current study we aim to qualitatively explore subjective definition of solitude. By employing qualitative methodologies, we engage in a data-driven approach to understanding solitude. Informed by existing literature, the study aimed to 1) conceptualize a subjective definition of solitude, 2) explore solitary activities, thoughts and affective experiences, and 3) explore the purpose behind seeking solitude.

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METHODOLOGY

99 **Participants:**

100 10 individuals, 5 females and 5 males, aged 24-28 years were recruited through
101 snowball sampling. All participants were of Indian nationality and were residents of
102 Bangalore. 7 out of 10 described themselves as ‘preferring solitude’. On average, the
103 participants spent anytime between 4-8hrs alone. Any identifying information gathered
104 during the interview was anonymized during the transcription process.

105 **Materials:**

106 The interview schedule (see Appendix A) for the semi-structured interviews were
107 validated through a 5 member pilot focus group prior to data collection. The interview tackled
108 questions such as: *How do you define solitude? Can you describe a recent experience of*
109 *solitude or ‘alone time’ to us? Why do you find yourself seeking solitude? Are there any*
110 *significant influencers (internal or external) which direct your solitude?*

111 **Procedure:**

112 Participants were presented with information regarding the study and their ethical
113 rights as a participant. The interview lasted for a maximum of 30 minutes, and was followed
114 by a demographic questionnaire with questions regarding age, gender, living conditions and
115 commute time.

116 All interviews were audio-recorded, with the consent of the participants, and were
117 later transcribed verbatim. Although transcripts were corrected for brevity, all phonetic
118 sounds, pauses and hesitations were retained to maintain authenticity. The transcripts were
119 analyzed through thematic analysis to identify common themes in participants’ experience of
120 solitude, with the rationale as a guiding tool.

121 Data Analysis:

122 Thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019) is a systematic qualitative method which uses a
123 data-driven approach to identify meaningful patterns across a data set. Keeping in mind the
124 exploratory nature of the current study, thematic analysis was identified as an appropriate
125 method because it allows the researchers to focus on the data, while being mindful of existing
126 literature at large.

127 Ethical Considerations:

128 The study was internally ethically approved by the Dept. of Psychology at Acharya
129 Institutes. Participants were informed about their rights to voluntary consent and
130 confidentiality prior to the interviews. Confidential data was anonymized, and was stored for
131 a duration of 5 years for academic and scientific purposes.

132

RESULTS

Through 10 semi-structured interviews with adults aged 24-28years, the study identified the following main themes: *Subjective definition of solitude, Solitary Activities, Solitary thoughts, Purpose of seeking solitude and Key differences between solitude & loneliness*. Sub-themes that emerged within each of the themes have been described below.

1: A Subjective Definition Of Solitude

In this study, solitude was theoretically defined as the '*psychological experience of being alone*' (Larson, 1990; Long & Averill, 2003) which assumes that solitude is purely a mental state. However, it has also been defined in terms of 'space' and its psychological benefits (Hammitt et al., 2001; Thoreau, 1981), indicative of its diverse and often confused nature. Therefore, the current study aimed to subjectively define solitude as a phenomenon independent of 'loneliness' or aloneness.

The sub-themes that emerged included: *the role of space in solitude, solitude as a mental state and Loneliness versus Solitude*. Most participants associated their definition of solitude with the existence of a quiet and personal space. "*According to me solitude is... your own space? Maybe with people, maybe without people.*" (LH, 9-10)

Similar to previous findings (Long et al., 2007), participants reported mixed opinions regarding the **role of space in their experience of solitude**. Some participants insisted that their solitude experience occurred in private non-shared environments. "*I think at home is when I really feel solitude... that's when I really feel okay, I'm alone, I have nobody around*" (TAP2, 75-76). However, others reported that their solitude experiences could also occur in public shared environments. "*Physically isolating myself is one way of being alone. Like... I am not a party person; I don't enjoy crowds. Yeah. So, I find myself in a corner... humming,*

156 *doing random things – again, that’s being alone, while I am around so many people but I*
157 *enjoy it.” (DB, 86-88).*

158 While describing solitude in public spaces, the role of nature was highlighted.
159 Participants often associated public solitude experiences with walks or excursions in natural
160 environments such as parks or farms. *“And there are times when – if I have a day off or*
161 *something – I’d take my bike and go somewhere to a farm or... someplace close by where I*
162 *can find something natural, you know?” (JO, 75-76).*

163 However, all participants alluded to a **mental nature of solitude** (e.g. Long et al.,
164 2007)), especially in the lack of mental engagement that is present in solitary situations. *“I*
165 *define it as a mental experience... I mean, where I don’t have to interact mentally with*
166 *someone else... I don’t have to hold a conversation; I don’t have to be engaged in like*
167 *listening to a voice note or watching a video.” (DK, 48-52).* Although participants reported
168 engaging in mentally stimulating activities (such as reading a book or watching videos
169 online), they still considered it as solitude as long as the engagement was agentic in nature
170 and not demanded of them as part of social interaction.

171 In comparison to **loneliness**, solitude was differentiated on the basis of agency, desire
172 for social interaction and the experience of positive social company. Participants describe
173 themselves as lonely when their lack of desired social company becomes salient, *“But*
174 *Loneliness would mean that I am being alone without a choice, or I would like to have*
175 *someone to speak to... but it’s inaccessible.” (DB, 64-66).* Interestingly, the experience of
176 loneliness is somewhat married to that of solitude due to an individual’s negative affective
177 experience of their time spent alone i.e. participants describe their alone time as lonely if they
178 feel negatively about it (DK, 190-191).

179 Therefore, the study found supporting evidence to describe solitude as a mental state

devoid of active engagement with others, which can occur regardless of its physical surroundings. While physical isolation is not necessary for the experience of solitude, it is how solitude is popularly experienced. Additionally, loneliness and solitude differ on the basis of an individual's active choice to seek and experience social interaction.

2: Solitary Activities

The sub-themes regarding solitary activities that emerged throughout the interviews included: *disconnecting activities*, *productivity* and *physical activities*. Since 'thinking' was unanimously reported as a major activity that participants engaged in, it has been discussed separately as a main theme.

When asked about solitary activities they engaged in, participants reported reading, listening to music, watching movies/TV shows etc. as common activities. "*I read books, novels, listen to music... sing... yeah yeah, so then I admire it myself, in the mirror. Change hairstyles, drape sarees, just like that.*" (LH, 35-38). Amongst such responses, a **desire to disconnect** (similar to 'disengaging activities' in Long et al., 2007)) from an otherwise taxing day or social experience was common. Participants also reported working on their hobbies such as writing stories or playing instruments (LH, JO, TAP1, DK).

Some individuals also reported engaging in **physical activities** such as taking walks, boxing, and cleaning. "*Recently I've been learning the violin.... I might even clean my room on the occasional day... yeah so basically... I can do pretty much anything alone.*" (DK, 37-43).

A cognizant sub-theme was a **desire for productivity** during solitude time. Participants (DK, LH, RPP1, SP) reported a desire to engage in activities closely related to their work or personal productivity, indicating that solitude could act as an ideal space to

204 increase productivity. Adversely, spending time alone often highlighted their lack of
205 productivity (LH), which resulted in feelings of stress and/or guilt.

206 However, the use of time alone to increase productivity was described as a positive
207 experience by some. *“Positive in the sense, I utilize my time to the fullest though I waste
208 some amount of time, but whatever time I am utilizing, it is for my betterment. My skills... I
209 develop my skills; I do some kind of work related to college or something. So... in that sense,
210 it’s positive. My work is never pending when I’m alone.”* (SP, 33-36).

211 While solitary activities were diverse in nature, participants displayed individual
212 differences in their solitary activities (whether they preferred a more physically engaging or
213 mentally engaging time) and the situational affective outcomes of solitude (for e.g.
214 individuals often reported engaging in disconnecting activities if they were previously
215 experiencing negative affect).

216 However, all individuals reported some form of significant thought that was ever-
217 present during their solitude time.

218

219 **3: Solitary Thoughts**

220 The study found the following sub-themes in relation to solitary thoughts: *solitude as*
221 *“Me Time”, positive thinking and negative thinking.*

222 In relation to the mental experience of solitude, participants reported experiencing
223 their time alone as an **extremely personal period** where they could ruminate and process
224 events and emotions from their daily life. Alternatively, a strong sense of freedom and self-
225 empowerment was often reported during these periods of solitude. *“uh sometimes I really
226 enjoy my time alone. I like it that I come back home and I... and I just be. And it’s my space
227 and I control uh everything in that surrounding uh... so I mean that gives me a sense of*

228 *freedom and it gives me a sense of uh.... ownership to myself” (HN, 25-31).*

229 While the act of thinking was omnipresent, and intrusively so, it was perceived as
230 *positive* or *negative* based on the contents and purpose of solitary thoughts. Participants
231 highlighted their tendency to reflect on the events of the day or introspect on past actions/
232 emotions as **positive** if it provided a space for self-improvement and gratitude. “...so, I am a
233 *person who likes to sit and think about the stuff or the gratitude I have towards people. So,*
234 *solitude gives me a time or umm umm... it helps me to think about the positive things in my*
235 *life.” (TAP1, 21-24). Thoughts of self-reflection were often self-centric, relating to the*
236 *individual’s past actions or future concerns/worries. However, participant JO also reported*
237 *spending significant time thinking of his role within his community as an environmentalist,*
238 *indicating the presence of other-oriented solitary thoughts.*

239 Solitary thoughts were categorized as **negative** if they elicited negative affect (such as
240 feelings of fear, apprehension, stress) within the participants. Concerns of time wasted (MD,
241 85-88), overthinking stemming from general anxiety (TAP2, 127-131) and overly self-critical
242 thoughts were reported as examples. “*Negative experience is...I eat too much. I personally*
243 *feel that because when I’m lonely, I spend so much of my money on myself buying some*
244 *useless things to eat and all those things. Another negative impact is that I overthink. I*
245 *overthink certain situations many times and I feel like I’m depressed or something that... that*
246 *comes to my mind.” (SP, 45-49)*

247 While deriving meaningful patterns across the data set, an underlying theme of
248 purpose of seeking solitude arose which was strongly connected to the solitary activities and
249 thoughts that individuals engaged in.

250

251 **4: Purpose Of Seeking Solitude:**

It is imperative to consider solitude as a complex non-social phenomenon, which is often in reaction to/in tandem with social situations around the individual. The sub-themes that arose within this theme are: *changing life circumstances, avoidance of social contact and self-regulatory solitude.*

A majority of the participants in this study (7/10) reported a strong personal preference for solitude. However, solitude was not reported as a common phenomenon across their life. Participants stated that they found themselves with increased alone time due to **changing life circumstances** such as moving out (TAP1, TAP2, RPP1), living away from family/friends (SP, HN, MD), marriage (LH) or drastic changes in their social circle (MD, DK). This created a new chunk of time that they found themselves alone in; the participants within this study indicated a healthy adjustment towards their solitude period. *“Uh, I’ve turned it to be positive... I’ve got adjusted. Initially, I was irritated just like nobody around? I’m not talking to anyone? That can never happen in my life.... So that’s the reason I’ve got adjusted to my space, where I feel it’s okay its good that I’m alone.”* (LH, 61-71).

Additionally, a preference for solitude also stems from a desire to **avoid unwanted social contact**. While some participants reported they spent time alone because they felt uncomfortable in an undesirable social setting, some participants indicated a desire to rest and recuperate after social interaction. *“My co-workers would ask me to eat lunch with them and they were in this huge group and I was extremely uncomfortable and like – it’s not about eating in groups, it’s just that I’m not comfortable with those people so I won’t feel comfortable sitting for an hour of lunch with them.”* (DK, 13-17).

Engaging in solitude to re-energize after a taxing social interaction, processing emotions and daily life events or introspecting past actions/thoughts and future directions of behaviour: displayed an underlying sub-theme of **self-regulation**. All participants indicated

the use of solitude in a self-regulatory fashion. In the case of solitary thoughts, they acknowledged their personal tendencies to think negatively (TAP1, RPP1, TAP2) and therefore, engaged in positive reflection (or meditation) during solitude (MD). During affective experiences, they preferred to spend time alone during emotionally charged situations in order to avoid emotional outbursts in public (DK). Additionally, they reported the use of their alone time as a personal period of self-reflection that enabled them to reevaluate personal goals and ambitions.

Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge the role of solitude as a self-regulatory phenomenon which is integral to an individual's path to well-being. Additionally, solitude as a non-social phenomenon may rejuvenate individuals to engage further in fulfilling social interactions. *Even now when I've made this group of 10 people and when we go do our thing, I make sure we have a good amount of solo time.... So they have solo time then they come, with like a particular mindset, all prepared and contributing to the group.... So, I think building communities that's what makes a lot of sense because – you can't build communities unless you have your solo time as well.*" (JL, 113-121)

DISCUSSION

This article explored solitude from a neutral conceptualization of it being the psychological experience of being alone (Larson, 1990; Nguyen et al., 2018). It employed a qualitative methodology to subjectively explore the definition, experience and purpose behind seeking solitude. We found that participants varied in their definition of solitude and highlighted individual differences in their purpose behind seeking solitude.

We found that solitude could occur in public or private spaces, but contained a unique lack of mental engagement with others, that was chosen (agentic). Indeed, one of the earliest conceptualizations of solitude coincided with that of privacy, referring to physical isolation (Berscheid, 1977). Further, it is marked by a lack of social interaction (Burger, 1995) and a psychological detachment from society (Hollenhorst & Jones, 2001).

Additionally, participants engaged in diverse solitary activities that may be disconnecting (e.g. watching movies), physical (e.g. gardening) or productivity related and/or thinking (e.g. reminiscing, rumination) related. Solitude was thought of as an extremely personal time of exercising freedom and self-empowerment (similar to McDonald, 2005; Senge, 1990) by participants. It often elicited thoughts of self-reflection and a rumination of past/present events and emotions. This was viewed as positive or negative coupled with their affective experiences at the time and their purpose of seeking solitude.

Participants stated three purposes of seeking solitude during this study, namely: an adaptation to changing life circumstances, a desire to avoid unwanted social contact and self-regulation. While solitude was previously understood in relation to social isolation or as a mechanism to disengage from society, participants used it as a method to emotionally recuperate between interactions (similar to Long, 2000; Senge, 1990). Across the study, solitude was found to play a self-regulatory role in the daily lives of participants by

315 encouraging emotional recuperation, healthy disengagement from stressful life situations and
316 self-reflection activities.

317 The current study is not without its limitations. Conducted on a limited population of
318 diverse individuals from Bangalore, the results reflect only an exploratory set of solitary
319 activities and thoughts. While the qualitative results highlight the unique perspectives of the
320 young adult population, it cannot be taken out of the present cultural context. Conducted with
321 participants living in an urban collectivist cultural context, the links between solitude and
322 nature (Hammitt et al., 2001) were left unexplored.

323 Future research may expand on the exploratory nature of the current study by
324 employing mixed methods and behavioural observation methods to identify subjective
325 experiences of solitude across situational correlates. While affective experiences of solitude
326 (Lay et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2018; Pauly et al., 2017) have been richly studied, the self-
327 regulatory links between solitude thoughts and moral behaviour (such as Akrivou et al., 2011)
328 can be a future avenue of research.

CONCLUSION

329 In conclusion, the current study used a qualitative approach to explore subjective
330 experiences and individual differences within solitude usage. While solitude is often
331 congealed with social isolation and loneliness, it remains starkly different in its purpose and
332 effects. Regardless of the space it is experienced in (private or public), solitude is marked by
333 a disengagement from immediate society. Individuals seem to spend time alone as a result of
334 changing life circumstances or as a self-regulatory mechanism to recuperate emotionally
335 between social interactions. While solitude has been linked to a deactivation of high valence
336 positive and negative affect, it is often sought after for its self-reflective and peaceful nature.
337 We found that participants primarily engaged in disconnecting, physical/productive or
338 thinking related activities when they spend time alone. While the study explored the
339 subjective experiences of Indian youth, it remains strongly housed in their urban cultural
340 context. While individual differences exist within the purpose and affective experiences of
341 solitude, it is clear that solitude plays an integral self-regulatory role in our lives.

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