



Solitude and Well-being: Considerations for the Digital Age

Scott W. Campbell*

Department of Communication Studies, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, United States of America

ABSTRACT

Solitude has the capacity to support or suppress well-being, depending on the conditions under which it is experienced, and those conditions are changing in the digital era. Before the uptake of the internet and mobile phones in daily life, solitude was primarily considered as a matter of being physically alone. Today, people can socially connect anytime-anywhere, which means solitude is no longer a mandatory experience. Furthermore, there are expanding layers of latent social connection and underlying expectations for accessibility that can shade how people experience time alone. This review addresses the changing conditions of solitude in the digital era, while reflecting on how we can better understand its benefits for well-being moving forward.

Keywords: Solitude; Social psychology; Psychiatry; Psychological well-being

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between solitude and psychological well-being has always been complicated. Time alone time can be important for recharging from social encounters and preparing for them [1]. It can also offer escape, freedom, creativity, and spiritual enrichment [2]. Yet, solitude runs counter to the need to belong and can lead to a sense of loneliness [3,4]. In other words, solitude is not necessarily good or bad for well-being, but has the capacity to help or hinder it, depending on the conditions under which it is experienced. For example, chosen and unchosen time alone may both be important for development; however, the former tends to support well-being, while the latter presents greater chance of loneliness [5,6].

The relationship between solitude and well-being has become even more complex with recent changes in the media environment. Prior to the uptake of the internet and mobile phones in daily life, engaging with media was overlooked as a means of not being alone, and concepts and measures of solitude were rooted in being physically removed from or unengaged with others [7,8]. The rise of anytime-anywhere access to others, information, and content challenges traditional notions of solitude, particularly as it has been treated as physical aloneness. Today the opportunities to socially connect reach far beyond the traditional constraints of shared space, and we need

to re-think what solitude fundamentally is, away from notions of physical aloneness and toward notions of social aloneness.

This review offers a view of solitude as social aloneness, bringing clarity to what it is by drawing distinctions with what it is not. As discussed below, solitude has been confused and conflated with other concepts and experiences. This review brings clarity to what solitude is, how certain conditions can shape it, and how those conditions have been changing rapidly in the digital era. It then draws from those points to reflect on challenges and opportunities for solitude and psychological well-being moving forward.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is solitude?

Solitude is a topic of interest across a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, law, literature, psychology, and others. Although there are different understandings and approaches to studying it, there is a good deal of agreement that solitude is a matter of being alone, with traditional emphasis on being physically separated from or unengaged with others. With the rise of digital media in everyday life, there has been a push to shift our understanding of solitude as a matter of social connection, whether it be physical or mediated [8]. This shift

Correspondence to: Scott W. Campbell, Department of Communication Studies, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, United States of America, E-mail: swcamp@umich.edu

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means we must consider layers of social connection when pinning down exactly what it means to be alone. Just as being aware of proximal others interferes with the restorative effect of solitude, merely having access to a smartphone supports the psychological vigilance to stay connected, which can hinder restoration of social energy [9-11].

Solitude, especially in the digital era, should be considered a matter of social aloneness, not just being unengaged with others, but also being inaccessible and not having access to other people. Access alone can shade solitude by keeping people cognitively connected and psychologically vigilant toward the social world [10,11]. Beyond connecting with other people, other forms of communication can also hinder solitude by populating the self with less direct social experiences [12]. Mass-mediated content, such as reading news and listening to music, should be taken into consideration when considering what it means for an experience not to be social. For an experience not to be social, one would need to be alone with their own thoughts. In this slippery landscape, one simple way of thinking of solitude is “(non)communication”, or having communication, in all its forms, be unavailable [8]. Having a clear and simple understanding of solitude is important because, as discussed next, there has been a great deal of misunderstanding about what solitude is, challenging knowledge about how it can help and hinder well-being.

What solitude is not

Solitude is not just about being physically alone. The notion of “Being alone” has traditionally been interpreted as being physically alone from others. This tradition is explained by the recent expansion of media in everyday life, particularly with the uptake of the internet and mobile phones. The foundational research on solitude had a focus on being proximally removed or unengaged [7,8]. We now live in hybrid spaces, with bits and bytes blended with atoms and molecules [13,14]. People now have access to information, content, and others anytime-anywhere, and the ability to connect between and beyond locations generates new possibilities and expectations for social accessibility. One might be physically alone in a remote location, but with a phone in their pocket they are still far from solitude.

Solitude is not loneliness

One of the common misunderstandings about solitude is that it equates to loneliness. Some treat them as being one and the same, while others assume that solitude necessarily leads to loneliness [2,15,16]. Loneliness is a feeling that can be a trait [17-19]. Having these feelings, and a tendency toward them, is different than solitude as the state of not being in communication with the social world. Furthermore, solitude does not necessarily lead to loneliness and can offer benefits, such as restoration, escape, freedom, and creativity [2]. This last point highlights another distinction—loneliness is inherently negative and solitude is not.

Solitude is no longer mandatory

One way of thinking about solitude is whether it is deliberate or mandatory, where people encounter unintended time alone. If we think of solitude from a (non)communication perspective, anytime-anywhere connectivity eradicates mandatory solitude. People can now bypass unintended time alone by having constant access to a range of social experiences. Whenever one prefers not to be with their own thoughts, they can check messages, get news, go on social media, stream entertainment, etc. The smartphone provides access to the social world anytime-anywhere and has become a primary way for escaping momentary boredom [20]. For some, such as seniors living on their own, this may be good news. However, there are also broader implications for solitude to no longer be required. Not everyone needs more solitude in their life. However, it does offer benefits for well-being, and with solitude no longer a mandatory experience, the importance of intentionally carving out time alone becomes heightened.

DISCUSSION

Changes in the media landscape present new challenges and opportunities for how people experience solitude and how scholars study it moving forward. On the practical front, solitude is challenged by its recently cropped scope, leaving us with only intentional solitude. As we lose the unintentional variety, intentional solitude also becomes challenged by the heightened expectations to be accessible associated with the social and psychological embedding of mobile media. In fact, much if not most mobile phone use are habitual, meaning people using it without even thinking [21-23]. These conditions do more to suppress than support the cognitive effort needed for intentional solitude.

CONCLUSION

Solitude is also challenged by the increasingly complex layers of social connection. If we think of solitude, in its purest form, as being alone with one’s own thoughts, it becomes more of an ideal than a reality-like objective truth in journalism. This is not to suggest that people cannot or should not strive for solitude, only that it realistically may be experienced in shades, with certain layers of connection, such as mass media content (e.g., listening to a podcast) and social accessibility (e.g., phone within reach, but not in use) shading the complete experience of solitude. This view of solitude as a matter of shades presents challenges and opportunities for scholarship on its implications for well-being. Moving forward, it will be important for researchers to be sensitive to the layers of social connection afforded by digital media because these are the conditions that shape solitude’s implications for well-being. In addition to whether time alone helps or hinders well-being, scholars will need to consider how (digital) shades of social connection, such as accessing mass-media content or being latently accessible to others, might condition the relationship between solitude and well-being. Just as individuals need to be mindful of the digital shades in practice, so too do scholars need to be mindful of them in research on solitude’s implications for well-being.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest related to the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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