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Exploring the Role of Time Alone in Modern Culture

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Abstract

This article is a discussion of a qualitative study in which seven undergraduate college students were interviewed regarding their impressions about the role of solitude in their lives and society's view of the same concept. Those interviewed expressed value in solitude, but also strongly suggested an imbalance of solitude versus socialization has detrimental effects. The role of social media was cited often, even though not a topic of the interview questions. Responses reflected changes in the conceptualization of solitude in current society. These changes have potential to impact the delivery of mental health services.

When observing modern culture, particularly in the United States, the trend toward interconnectedness becomes markedly apparent. There are Internet-based social networking sites specifically designed to keep the user connected to family, friends, classmates, and co-workers. Celebrities and athletes can communicate to their fan base with up-to-the-instant currency by simply "tweeting" a message. Dating sites claim the ability to pair together soul mates or, if preferred, one-night stands. Even television programs often rely upon viewers' online feedback to determine the fate of the participants. The popularity of these social avenues seems to be evidence of perceived benefits stemming from being socially interconnected. This raises the question: if interconnectedness is what we as a culture are emphasizing, what then of the role and significance of solitude?

Considering this question through the lens of the mental health profession, Donald Winnicott's (1958) seminal work entitled "The Capacity to be Alone" leaps to the forefront. He opened by stating his desire to "make an examination of the capacity of the individual to be alone, acting on the assumption that this capacity is one of the most

important signs of maturity in emotional development (p. 416).” Winnicott continued to express his belief that much has been made of the fear and/or desire to be alone, but little in regard to the ability to be alone. Working from the assumption that the ability to be alone is a hallmark of emotional maturity raises new questions in a society appearing to deemphasize the development of this capacity, primarily: 1) what is the effect, if any, upon attachment, identity, and emotional development; and 2) how does the mental health profession address this effect?

Upon attempting to conduct a review of the relevant literature, it was found that while there is a modest amount of research regarding the individual’s experience when spending time alone, the literature on the topic of solitude, particularly as it pertains to mental health, is sparse. Previous research regarding solitude focused primarily upon the subjects’ experience and activities while spending time alone (Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1978; Larson, 1990) or attempted to explore possible benefits of solitude (Larson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Graef, 1982; Larson & Lee, 1996; Long & Averill, 2003). However, there was little recent data was found in regard to the exploration of how the capacity to be alone actually develops, if it is indeed significant to emotional maturity, or allow for how it may be affected by modern cultural developments. Although there seems to be a social consensus that solitude is beneficial and may be necessary for well-being, this is still a largely unexplored assumption. There have also been assumptions made about the influence of advances in technology, such as the Internet and social media, with little or no correlating data for support. Therefore, designing a qualitative study seems the best route to explore the topic without introducing researcher bias.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of time alone in light of recent cultural changes. Seven interviewees were each was asked five open-ended questions about how they viewed the role of solitude in his or her personal life and also his/her perceptions of society’s views on the topic (See Appendix A). Care was taken to allow equally for positive and negative responses. Although the influence of social media and technology have been widely discussed as impacting relationships and personal behavior, specific mention of the topic was not included to avoid introducing bias into the interview.

In the process of selecting possible participants, it was decided that the study be restricted to adults since the questions addressed the choices made about how one’s time is used. Children and adolescents have varying degrees of control over this in their own lives. The researchers chose college students as the pool of possible participants. The administrative staff of two colleges, Lindsey Wilson College and Ashland Community and Technical College, assisted in recruitment of participants. The decision was made to also allow snowball sampling (allowing participants to recruit others). The final pool of those interviewed consisted of seven adults, four male and three female. All were students in undergraduate college programs.

Each participant was informed of the purpose of the study and given a copy of the questions to read before agreeing to participate. They were also given oral and written information and each participant gave informed consent before the interview began. An

audio recording was made of each interview, and then each interview was transcribed. All transcriptions were checked for accuracy by the second researcher. All transcripts and audio recordings were identified only numerically to maintain confidentiality.

After each interview was transcribed, a tentative code sheet was constructed to categorize common themes. The researchers reviewed each transcript individually and then compared coding. The coding information was then analyzed for important emerging themes.

Results

Analysis of the information given by the participants revealed some points that were made by all seven participants. One of these points was that, in their view, solitude is necessary for all individuals. Participants' answers included the necessity of time for centering oneself and reflection, stress relief, and overall mental health benefits. All seven also pointed out there must be a balance between solitude and social interaction. According to their responses, time alone is necessary to process what happens in the presence of others and to maximize their potential. All respondents also indicated they felt that solitude has cognitive benefits, and six of the seven connected these benefits to productivity, such as problem solving, task completion, etc.

All seven participants also had strong views of the possible negative aspects of solitude, usually phrased as "too much time alone." The language about negative aspects of solitude was much stronger than the language used when referring to not having enough time alone. The respondents indicated that spending too much time alone could be harmful to one's health, leading to possible depression, addiction to being alone and/or avoiding the presence of others.

Six of the seven specifically mention their opinion that society had a negative view of the person who spends time alone by choice. The language contained in the answers regarding how society views those spending time alone was even stronger. Some of the terms used by respondents included "loner," "odd bird," "badge of oddness," and "abnormal." Four of the respondents used the descriptive term of "hermit."

There was one notably contradictory finding. In comparing the content of each person's interview, although all seven participants indicated solitude was not only desirable, but necessary, only two of the seven reported intentionally choosing to be alone. This indicated a discrepancy in their opinion of solitude in general versus their personal priorities. In fact, two of the respondents specifically stated they did not intentionally seek out solitude.

As mentioned before, social media and technology were specifically avoided as question topics to avoid introducing bias. Nevertheless, six of the seven participants brought up the topic voluntarily. Their interpretation of solitude also included the impact of these factors in their conceptualization of solitude.

Participants were asked for their view of solitude, and many chose to give their personal definition of the concept. Six of the seven participants cited the absence of interaction. This highlights the changing definition of solitude in our society. Since it is now possible to be in contact with other humans to some degree at any hour, the lines between being alone and being with others have blurred. So, according to these participants, solitude is derived from withdrawing from interaction, not physically

removing oneself from the presence of others. A particularly illustrative example came from one of the respondents, “if I were just to get on Facebook, I would consider that to be time alone, but if I were chatting, then I wouldn’t.”

Discussion

Interpreting the data offers a preliminary glimpse into how solitude is defined, the role it plays in the lives of individuals within modern society, as well as its perceived benefits and detriments. Responses provided by the interviewees seem to support many of the generally accepted intuitive assumptions regarding solitude, e.g., necessity for general well-being, self-awareness, and stress relief (illustrated by one respondent’s statement that “society impacts a stress upon us that you can’t really release until you’ve had time to think”). Also, the researchers gained insight into the perceived risks and negative societal view of solitude, as evidenced by responses that “if you don’t have regular interaction, then there’s the possibility of kind of losing grasp on reality” and “[society] has a pretty poor view of [being alone]... it’s almost like a badge of oddness if someone seeks solitude.”

By pairing these reported perceptions regarding spending time alone, one can begin to form a possible explanation for the contradiction between the respondents’ unanimous belief in solitude as a need, and the fact that few reported intentionally making time for it. The perceived risks, coupled with the negative societal view and perception of only mild cognitive benefits, suggest why one would err on the side of caution; no respondent mentioned risks of too much socialization. This dissonant stance that one needs solitude but that few intentionally make time for it could draw the parallel to physical exercise. Most (perhaps all) would agree that exercise is needed; however, far fewer actually make time to do so. In this instance, it is one’s physical health that suffers, or at least is not maximized, by the lack of activity. What, then, is it that suffers, or what opportunity is missed, when time is not taken for solitude? The respondents, again, offer insight, stating, “if you don’t have enough time to yourself, I don’t feel like you can fully be yourself out in the world;” and “[with solitude] you get a better sense of who you are and why you do some of the things you do.”

It is in this vein that the counseling profession has the opportunity to learn more of the client’s life experience and, in turn, be more effective. Further research into the function of solitude within modern society could yield insight into how/when clients utilize interventions, techniques, and processes they receive while in counseling. This study represents an early attempt to do just that—understand the role solitude plays in the lives of individuals so that the information gained may be applied to the therapeutic process.

Limitations & Suggestion for Further Research

The small sample size, while allowing for a deeper exploration on an individual level, limits the ability to generalize these findings. The study does offer insight into topics for further exploration, such as: the specific role of social media in regard to spending time alone; the effects of social media upon the development of an individual’s identity; whether there is a correlation between time spent alone and the quality/quantity

of an individual's relationships; the possible effects from a perceived societal view of solitude in regard to the development of one's willingness/capacity to be alone. Researchers could also work to quantify reported utilization of social media in more specific terms or replicate this study with a larger, more diverse population.

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Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm

Appendix A

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Researchers: William Z. Nance & Dr. Melinda Mays

Interview Questions

- Tell me about your personal feelings regarding solitude.
- What experiences in your life have impacted how you feel about time spent alone?
- What do you feel are some of the desirable/undesirable aspects of solitude?
- How do you view society's opinion of spending time alone, and how does it affect you?
- How do you (specifically) utilize, or not utilize, solitude?