

**Robert J. Coplan and Julie C. Bowker**

**"Should We Be Left Alone? Psychological Perspectives on the Costs and Benefits of Solitude"**

The experience of solitude is a universal phenomenon. However, our subjective responses to being alone comprise a wide range of diverse reactions. Accordingly, it is perhaps not surprising that the psychological study of solitude has been similarly characterized by multiple and competing perspectives. In this chapter we will review and synthesize psychological perspectives in the study of solitude, with a particular focus on the potential costs and benefits of spending time alone.

We will first explore the notion that solitude may have *negative costs*, which can be traced back to biblical times (Genesis 2:18, And the LORD God said "It is not good for the man to be alone") and has long been a central theme across psychological disciplines. Developmental psychologists argue that excessive solitude in childhood can lead to lasting socio-emotional difficulties; social psychologists maintain that affiliation is a basic human need; and neuroscientists assert that loneliness is not only bad for our well-being, but also takes a toll on our physical health. Furthermore, not only is extreme social avoidance considered by clinical psychologists as a symptom of mental health disorders, social isolation is proscribed by some psychologists as a form of punishment (e.g., timeouts for children, solitary-confinement for prisoners).

We will then turn our attention to a contrasting approach, as psychologists have also called attention to the *benefits* of being alone. From this perspective, solitude is a context for self-discovery and self-realization, a restorative haven for the mind (and soul), and a unique venue for solving problems, promoting mastery, and fostering creativity. Notwithstanding, and as noted by personality psychologists, there are also important *individual differences* in our relationship with solitude. People who tend to be shy often desire social contact, but experience fear and self-consciousness that may lead to solitude tinged by loneliness and worry. Introverts may enjoy a night out with friends, but such experiences often trigger a subsequent retreat to solitude to "recharge their batteries". Conversely, extraverts may have difficulty tolerating time alone and seek the company of others to bolster their energy reserves.

A key factor is likely *agency*. When imposed, solitude is often an undesired state that comes at a cost for the individual; when chosen, solitude can be a desirable experience that affords us a variety of important benefits. Notwithstanding, many questions remain – and we

will briefly touch upon these as items for future research. Does solitude have different implications across the lifespan? Does the meaning and impact of solitude differ across cultures? [*note*: the short answer to both of these questions appears to be a resounding "yes!"]. Finally, although we might at times find ourselves alone in a crowd, alone with nature, or alone with our thoughts, rapidly evolving technological advances intend to connect all of us – all of the time – to social and informational networks. This inevitably leads to the question as to whether any of us will ever truly be "alone" in the future.

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