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# Understanding the power of the "solo"

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**Abstract**

Solitude is a fundamental aspect of wilderness experiences and solo experiences, lasting 5 hours or more, have a strong 'survival' element and are a beneficial component to outdoor therapy programmes, sometimes marking life transitions for people. A shift has been made, however, towards solo experiences that centre on the natural environment rather than 'survival'. Shorter experiences of solitude in wilderness, e.g. quiet time or mini-solos, can offer the most "powerful" form of private reflection and can be self-initiated or prescribed. These 'shorter' solos have not, however, been extensively researched and neither have they been investigated in local green or semi-natural areas.

This paper discusses a study that qualitatively explored people's experience, meaning-making and human-environment interaction during a mini-solo in a local green space and identified the impact of the experience on participants' sense of well-being. The mini-solo involved participants spending time in nature without distraction from technology or books and, if possible, people, lasting from 20 minutes to 1 hour.

12 older adults (55-74 years; 8 females and 4 males) recruited from walking groups and six younger adults (19-22 years; 4 females and 2 males) undertook a mini-solo. Pre- and post-experience interviews and journal writing (before, during and after the mini-solo) were analysed using thematic analysis. Four themes were created: ' Exerting Control', 'Aspects of Distraction' and 'Receptivity to Solo Experience'. Findings will be explained in relation to theory, literature and policy and may have implications for 'green prescriptions' as a short-term nature-based solution for well-being. Future directions for research are discussed.

*Keywords:* mini-solo experience, wellbeing.

## Introduction

1 in 4 people in the UK experience mental health problems (Mental Health Foundation, 2014) and most commonly they experience a combination of depression and anxiety. Recent government cuts to mental health support (McNicoll, 2015) demands research into how best to support people experiencing mental health issues. This is essential since lack of support early on in mental illness can create many serious conditions in the future resulting in more demands on the NHS for longer periods of time (NSPCC, 2015).

The *Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment* (MENE; Natural England, 2014) suggests the value of nature for people's mental health and well-being, providing evidence of people's relationship with nature in England. MENE shows that people in England visit the countryside, green spaces in towns and cities, and the coast most, with 38.9 % of the population making visits to natural environments at a total of 751.8 million visits. The positive role of nature in human health, well-being and spirituality is also supported by a wealth of literature and advocates its healing and restorative properties (Pretty *et al*., 2007).

Contemporary evidence is also emerging that emphasises the benefits of spending time alone (Nicholls, 2008), such as enabling the individual to have psychological and physical freedom - often associated with increased creativity (Long & Averill, 2003). Whilst traditionally research has focused on the negative effects of solitude (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008) conflicting ideas about the effects of solitude have led to theories suggesting that solitude appears on a continuum, rather than at either extreme (Coplan & Bowker, 2013) and that it depends entirely on the context and interpretation of solitude. Wilderness therapy research (Gass, 1993; Nicholls, 2008) support the benefits of long and short solo experiences in nature but little research has been done in semi-natural environments.

In order to bridge the gap this study focuses on semi-natural environments considered here as green areas, such as parks (Beringer, 2004), that have a 'balance' between people and nature, enabling people to experience nature in their daily lives (and more affordably). This paper aims to present meaningful accounts of what it means to spend time with one's self and a semi-natural environment, doing so using two research questions: 1) How do people experience and make sense of 'mini solos'?; 2) What are the benefits of mini-solos?

## Methodology

### Participants

Purposive sampling recruited younger adults aged between 18-25 years old and older adults required to be 40 - 75 years old and part of a walking group within Sheffield (it was decided that individuals who frequently visit natural places would be happier to take part in outdoor research). A total of 18 participants involved in the study; six young adults (19-25 years; 4 females and 2 males) and 12 older adults (55-74 years; 8 females and 4 males).

### Location

Endcliffe Park, a large public park based close to the city centre of Sheffield, selected because of its accessibility for participants and its combination of natural features (a river running the length of the park, wooded areas, open space etc.) and built features (such as a playground, café and gardens) offered an ideal semi-natural environment (Mausner, 1996).

### Design

The study consisted of two solo sessions, 1-2 weeks apart (Solo 1 & Solo 2). Semi structured interviews and journals, which provided the opportunity to write or sketch freely and away from social and researcher influences (Bobilya, Kalisch & McAvoy, 2005), were utilised.

### Procedure

Participants were given an information pack, including the consent form, detailing the purpose of the study that participants were required to read, or have read aloud, and sign. Journals were distributed but with no requirement to use these during the solo session if participants did not wish to. During the study, participants were seated in the park approximately 10-20 metres away from paths and distractions and were asked to remain seated there for the duration of the study. For each solo session (Solo 1 and Solo 2) audio recorded pre- and post-experience interviews were conducted on-site, lasting 5-10 minutes. Participants were given 20-40 minutes alone time, within sight of the

researcher. Arrangements for Solo 2 were made for the subsequent week, following the same procedure as the first solo session. Participants kept their journal between solo sessions which they were free to write in if they wished. After Solo 2 participants handed in their journal for analysis, were debriefed and reminded of their right to withdraw.

**Ethics**

Ethical approval was granted by Sheffield Hallam University. The physical and psychological health of participants was ascertained verbally before beginning the study to ensure no one would be harmed as a result of their participation. The consensual agreement asked participants to verify that they understood their role in the study and felt happy to take part. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw their data from the study at any point up to seven days after completion of Solo 2 before and after each solo session. They were also made aware that their data would be kept confidential and pseudonyms would be used in reports, publications and presentations to ensure anonymity. Hard copies of transcripts were anonymised and locked in a secure cabinet and all data gathered from participants were transferred into password protected folders on a computer using an encrypted USB stick.

**Analysis**

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and its six stages of analysis were completed; familiarity with the data, generating initial codes, transferring codes onto post-it-notes, interrogating and grouping them and developing the groups into 3-4 specific themes on a thematic map. Participants pseudonym initials, the interview (e.g. pre- or post-interview), solo session (e.g. Solo 1 or Solo 2), gender and age are provided in square brackets after each data extract.

**Analysis and Discussion**

Three latent themes were created;' Exerting Control', 'Aspects of Distraction' and 'Receptivity to Solo Experience', and there were some overlaps due to the complex relationship between control and distraction.

**Exerting Control:** 'Exerting Control' is about having, not having and relinquishing control. GB describes her difficulty with not knowing the time and urge to regain control during the solo experience:

> I kind of like realised how controlling I was that I wanted to know what time it was how long I had left… I needed to just like let it go. [GB, post-interview, Solo 1, female, aged 22]

There was also a fixation on planning time using planners, diaries, schedules etc. as participants reported they had little control over life demands, feeling "bogged down" [ALH, post-interview, Solo 2, female, aged 21] or "tied down" [RMC, post-interview, Solo 1, male, aged 22] by responsibilities. Some felt "nervous", were a "bit bored" and spent time "planning ahead" during Solo 1 but contrastingly during Solo 2 some had "more time to enjoy it rather than thinking ah is it nearly done yet", "it's nice to not have to think about what time it is" and time "went quicker" suggesting improvement as participants grew more familiar with the solo experience.

Perceived control has been linked to increased positive affect, reduced levels of psychological distress (Ross & Mirowsky, 2013) and conversely, powerlessness and lack of control has been associated with a decline in wellbeing and general psychological health (Wallerstein, 1992) and concerns about time being 'lost' (Carstensen, Isaacowitz & Charles, 1999). These are aspects to remain aware of when implementing mini-solos as an intervention or prevention.

**Aspects of Distraction**

'Aspects of Distraction' has both positive and negative features and arose from questions about what helps participants to relax normally and from questions about their solo experiences. There are four subthemes; '*Dependence*', '*Avoidance*', '*Situational Distractions*' and '*Noticing Nature*'.

***Dependence***

Dependence on distraction highlights the contrast between young and older adult's reliance on different types of distraction. Technological distractions featured heavily in the rhetoric of the young adults; "phone addict" [JLP, pre-interview, Solo 1, female, aged 22], "depend on phones" [ALH, pre-interview, Solo 1, female, aged 21], "frustrating being away from my phone" [JR, post-interview, Solo 1, male aged 19], "I tend to listen to music" [RMC, pre-interview, Solo 1, male, aged 22]. However, these types of distractions were rarely mentioned by the older adults, suggesting a potential generational gap in people's dependence on distraction.

Older adults preferred analogue distractions over digital ones e.g. "crosswords or number puzzles" [AJC, pre-interview, Solo 1, aged 61] or "daydreaming while you're washing the pots or hoovering up" [PK, post-interview, Solo 2, aged 65]. Future applications of solo experiences in natural settings may need to adapt methodological approaches (i.e. journal writing) to accommodate the younger and older adult's preference for technology, perhaps by using an App on a phone in the place of a journal.

***Avoidance***

Avoidance involves making excuses or a reluctance to be alone in nature without a distraction. JLP exemplifies this stating:

> It's funny how you can find time for like everything but you can't find time just to like, be with yourself. [JLP, post-interview, Solo 2, female, aged 22]

Avoidance was also attributed to laziness; "I just need to make more of an effort to be less lazy really" [AH, pre-interview, Solo 1, female, aged 59] and PK acknowledges her flightiness; "I just flit from one thing to another" and continues, explaining that she doesn't allow herself "time out without occupation" [PK, post-interview, Solo 2, female, aged 65].

This highlights that if participants do not actively engage in solo time they may not experience the benefits of solitude e.g. freedom and increased creativity (Long & Averill, 2003). Avoidance has also been linked to depression and negative affect and thus may influence how people experience solo time and their choice in partaking in solo experiences (i.e. a person with depression may avoid being alone, due to excessive rumination; Trew, 2011).

***Situational Distractions***

'Situational Distractions' is the only aspect of distraction in which typically people feel they have no control of. Participants overwhelmingly felt that they had little control over the “clutter” [RMC, post-interview, Solo 1, male, aged 22] such as: busy lifestyles, people and animals, as well as features within the semi-natural environment e.g.:

> I keep looking at dogs or the kids or the parents or I’m hearing noises and sounds so all the five senses are much more alert… it is still pleasant but I'm not getting the same sense of depth I got with the last one (Solo 1). [AJC, post-interview, Solo 2, female, aged 61]

Broad statements like “life just got in the way” [PK, pre-interview, solo 2, female, aged 65] were also used to express passivity towards busy lifestyles and shows how situational distractions were used as an excuse to avoid solo time.

***Noticing Nature***

'*Noticing nature*' represent how participants were aware of their surroundings but also their tendency to focus on themselves, their thoughts and generally disconnected from nature. References to nature were made like “Birdsong, stream bubbling over rocks, clouds moving across blue sky, different shades of green, sleet – 7 seconds to melt” [AH, journal, female, aged 59] but descriptions were usually vague and only inferred connections to, and benefits from, being in nature, stating they felt "grounded again" [JLP, post-interview, female, Solo 2, aged 22], had "headspace" [ALH, post-interview, female, Solo 2, aged 21] and were "gazing and watching" [AJC, pre-interview, Solo 2, female, aged 61]. This lack of detail suggests that semi-natural environments don not invoke the same depth and connectedness in participants as in previous wilderness studies (Gass, 1993; Nicholls, 2008).

**Receptivity to Solo Experience**

'Receptivity to Solo Experience' captures participant's (across both age groups) universal and overall enjoyment and positivity towards their solo experiences; "quite peaceful" [AH, post-interview, Solo 1, female, aged 59] and "rewarding" [ALH, post-interview, Solo 2, female, aged 21]. 15 out of the 18 participants used the journal and was used mainly to record simple observations with minimal reflection (Dyment & O’Connell, 2010), but a small proportion of the participants engaged in reflective practice, describing it as "therapeutic" [JLP, pre-interview, Solo 2, female, aged 22] and "personal therapy" [PK, post-interview, Solo 2, female, aged 65]. Others state that people often overlook the "beauty in the things you pass everyday" [ALH, journal, female, aged 21]. This highlights potentially the need for reflective tools alongside solo experiences to support reflection since it can have 'therapeutic' outcomes.

**Discussion**

The findings highlight the inclination for people to exert control over their lives, which influences how they react and create meaning during their solo experiences. Most participants welcomed the solo experiences but several younger adults struggled to detach themselves from the urge to control their time and intruding thoughts. Reactions to distraction were highly subjective and susceptible to change from solo to solo and dependent on mood. It would be over-simplistic to assume that the desire for distraction is always linked to an adverse outcome, yet the majority of younger

participants perceived technological distractions in connection with nature experiences to be negative. Brief periods of time spent alone in a semi-natural environment were beneficial to individuals, considered by many to be calming and relaxing. Participants did not, however, immerse themselves or pay as much attention to the natural features in the semi-natural environment as has been found to be in more remoter and wilder environments (Freeman, Akhurst, Bannigan & James, 2016), suggesting that the typology of the environment (as well as weather) may be an influence, but more time and support may provide improvement. Indeed in wilder environments, and experiencing longer solo experiences (up to 34-36 hours), the effects are more profound among participants (Freeman, et al., 2016) but the impact is not vastly different from those evidenced in this study and does not negate the benefits of the more accessible and affordable, and therefore more attainable, semi-natural environment mini-solo experience.

A limitation of this study was that the participants were self-selecting and some of them were more used to spending time in nature in some form. Time scale also became a limitation, as time between solo sessions had to be restricted to a period of two weeks due to insufficient resources. This inadvertently reduced the likelihood of witnessing any lasting effects, thus longitudinal research is essential.

Overall, the current research works towards ways of improving wellbeing but fundamentally, further research is needed to: conduct longitudinal studies; identify how best to support people in partaking in solo-experiences; study clinical (eg. people experiencing low to medium mental distress/illness) and adverse nature user samples; work alongside or within a NHS mental health trust. Future research may also need to use measures of wellbeing and nature connectedness to better establish whether these mini-solos are effective at improving and sustaining psychological wellbeing. Additionally, where the participants live and were brought up should be recorded and the link between location typology and participants' experiences should be explored (to the level and detail demonstrated in Freeman, 2013), including their expectations and how this may also affect the outcome of the mini-solo.

**Conclusion**

Essentially, mini-solo experiences are a promising short-term nature-based solution for wellbeing as both solitude and the semi-natural environments engender uplifting and positive effects for participants. Mini-solos would be beneficial to those who experience low mood and anxiety due to these experiences being typically relaxing and peaceful, and for some, it enables people to gain control over worrying or intruding negative thoughts. It thus may be beneficial to include mini-solo experiences within green prescription (Gribben, Goodyear-Smith, Grobbelaar, O'Neill & Walker, 2000) as an option for GP's and patients as a self-administered therapeutic approach. It would be an inexpensive and self-motivating approach to wellbeing and thus supporting the utilisation mini-solo experiences within green prescriptions is essential as they have the potential to produce positive personal, social and economic repercussions.

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