

## **VII Solitude Today: Technology, Community, and Identity**



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# Solitude in the Digital Age: Privacy, Aloneness, and Withdrawal in Dave Eggers's *The Circle*

**Abstract:** This essay investigates various forms of solitude against the backdrop of contemporary technological progress and social media. Taking Dave Eggers's critically acclaimed novel *The Circle* (2013) as the focus of argumentation, this paper shows and discusses how different experiences of solitude may be altered and shaped by new technologies.

## 1. Social Media as a Topic of Cultural Discourse

Today, social media have come to feature as an important aspect of many peoples' everyday lives. José van Dijck observes that “the widespread presence of [social media] platforms [has driven] people to move many of their social, cultural, and professional activities to these online environments” (4). By now, it is undeniable that the emergence of these new media has drastically altered the landscape of human experience. This development has been perceived in various ways by the broad public: as it is often the case with technological advancements, there are people who enthusiastically welcome all forms of social media into their lives and then there are those who are more critical of this trend. The latter group fears that being constantly connected to the internet will lead to nonstop surveillance and a loss of privacy, resulting in negative consequences for their private and ‘offline’ lives. This discourse has over time generated heated debates on the benefits and dangers of the internet and social media in particular, and has furthermore become the subject of many forms of cultural expression. Often, cultural products such as fiction contemplate how technological developments “reshape the ... experience of ‘being human’” (Yar 29).

Dave Eggers's novel *The Circle* (2013) is a highly controversial fictional rendering of how the ubiquity of social media might impact the makeup of human existence and social interaction on both an individual and on a more universal level. Set in a probable and “not-too-distant future” (Snow; see also Williams; Ludwigs; Tommasi 249), the narrative follows 24-year-old Mae Holland's rapid ascent in a fictitious company called the Circle. The third-person narrative perspective concentrates on Mae and turns her into “our fictional stand-in” (Williams). Through her experiences the readers can closely observe and simultaneously critically distance themselves from the projected developments. The novel's eponymous enterprise ranks as “the hottest company on the planet” (Eggers 72) and has secured itself a

steady position “on the forefront of social media” (185) through various innovations and the promise to perfect its users’ online presence. After having overcome some initial struggles to adapt to the pace, workload, and demands of her job, Mae quickly turns into an advocate for the Circle’s ideas (Tommasi 249) and puts her work above all other aspects of her life. Ignoring the skepticism and warnings from the people around her and regardless of any consequences, she makes it her mission to help the company reach all of its goals, even its ultimate one, namely to collect all the information in the world and to make all aspects of life transparent.

Despite some mixed reviews with regard to content, style, and technological accuracy, *The Circle* quickly turned into a bestseller, a fact that indisputably mirrors contemporary society’s widespread yet ambivalent fascination with social media. The novel ranks as an important cultural product, as it “[explores] a particular set of ideas and their implications” by showing how technology and social media might and even already do influence contemporary life (Galow 115). Presenting an enterprise that has the potential to shape and transform social structures and the overall experience of everyday life, *The Circle* contributes to the critical discourse on the possible impact of techno-scientific progress on society.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Eggers’s novel is the thought-provoking elaboration on the topic of solitude. Following recent appeals to study the importance of solitude in a technology-driven society that highly values constant connectedness to and participation on social networking sites (Neyfakh), this essay investigates diverse forms of solitude as presented in *The Circle*. I will show that Eggers’s novel engages in a timely and multilayered discussion of distinct shapes and understandings of solitude against the backdrop of an environment where privacy and aloneness have become nearly impossible.

## 2. Solitude and Aloneness in the Digital Age: Theoretical Considerations

Self-imposed solitude has often been the topic of philosophical inquiry and scholarly examination alike. In 1854, Henry David Thoreau stated that he “[finds] it wholesome to be alone” (180) in his endeavor “to live deliberately” (135), thereby alluding to the positive effects that spending time alone can entail. Generally speaking, solitude allows for undistracted “contemplation, exploration, problem-solving, introspection, and the escape of pressures” (Rubin xv). Moreover, being alone embraces restorative and recuperative qualities. Throughout history, individuals or groups of people have often chosen to consciously withdraw from society, be it only for a certain amount of time or entirely. They sought solitude in order to relax, reflect, enjoy privacy, or even to make political statements.

In the wake of the digital and technological revolution, with its side effects of permanent availability and connectedness, spending time alone has become increasingly difficult. Ever since the introduction of the internet, emailing, and cell phones, people feel the pressure to be available around the clock. In fact, it is nearly taken for granted that we are just one click, email, or phone call away. Social media have not only contributed to this trend but also actually intensified it. They have rendered “the worlds of online and offline . . . increasingly interpenetrating” (van Dijck 4), as they invite users to share their private and offline experiences online. Thus, social media promote being connected to the online community at any time. As a result, privacy and aloneness have come to be rare goods in our contemporary society.

These developments have elicited critical comments by both scholars and the concerned public. Of course, it is important not to lapse into polemic black-and-white thinking on the dangers and pitfalls of the internet. Yet, it is equally necessary to consider how technological progress affects the human experience. Robert J. Coplan and Julie C. Bowker, for instance, wonder “whether any of us will ever truly be *alone* in the future,” given the fact that “rapidly evolving technological advances intend to connect all of us – all of the time” (11). In the face of ever-expanding social media, it does not seem too far-fetched to assume that a continuous online presence may have negative by-effects, as it might distract users from their off-line lives and even deprive them of much-needed time for themselves. “[I]f we are always on,” Sherry Turkle comments, “we may deny ourselves the rewards of solitude” (3). Clearly, experiences of solitude are at least compromised, if not endangered, by the omnipresence of social media and the inherent perceived pressure to always be online. It can definitely be said that, thanks to new communication technologies, “the experience of being alone is being transformed dramatically” (Neyfakh). Thus, it is important to systematically and critically approach the question of how social media might shape and impinge on experiences of solitude (Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider 330). Considering *The Circle* a revelatory and elaborate contribution to this inquiry, this essay will illuminate and discuss Eggers’s implementation of different forms of solitude. It will thereby grapple with the overall question of how social media might play an important role in shaping forms of solitude in the future.

### 3. Privacy and Surveillance

The Circle’s policies concerning privacy serve as the basis for the shape and transformation of experiences of solitude in the fictional world Eggers envisions. Therefore, it is essential to first examine how the overall concept of privacy is imagined

in the narrative. Following Mae's development, which runs parallel to the gradual ramifications on privacy undertaken by the Circle, the reader gains insight into the ways in which the company interferes with users' private data and how it steadily tries to abolish privacy.

Though a relatively young company, the Circle has quickly developed into a vast enterprise. The company ranks among "the best-known [companies] in the world" (Eggers 2) and has already "subsumed" and eliminated all formerly popular social networking and media platforms (23; see also Atwood). Many people wish to work for this hip firm. At first glance, the Circle seems to offer its employees a utopian idyll (Grossman): situated on "soft green hills" (Eggers 1), the campus of the Circle's headquarters features not only various office buildings but also a plethora of leisure facilities that cater to every possible need and desire. The vision and mission of the company, too, evoke a utopian flair: it is the Circle's goal to revolutionize and facilitate people's online presence, to "[use] social media to create a safer and saner world" (446), and to establish "[o]ne hundred percent democracy" (386) through mandatory user participation. Other than monopolizing social media for themselves, the founders of the Circle, also known as the Three Wise Men – a label that playfully hints at the company's alleged "messianic" mission (Charles) – plan to make all aspects of life transparent and to collect all the information in the world. The megalomania behind the enterprise becomes apparent when Bailey Stenton, one of the heads of the Circle, summarizes the long-term goals of the company: "We will become all-seeing, all-knowing" (70).

These aims are to be achieved through numerous, seemingly harmless innovations. Although "[n]early all of the technological developments imagined in the book are meant to serve positive ends" (Galow 125) such as lowering crime rates and simplifying peoples' lives, exactly the same techno-scientific inventions largely affect all dimensions of privacy. For example, the Circle collects and saves all their users' information and data in a cloud where "[i]t can never be lost" (Eggers 43). Also, the company introduces SeeChange, a monitoring system that facilitates continual world-wide surveillance. The company and its proponents install small cameras all over the world in order to permanently record everything and to "have constant access" (63) to whatever place they want to observe. Notably, this is undertaken "with no permit" (62), yet tolerated by the users. Furthermore, the company encourages politicians and later also the broad public to go completely transparent by streaming their lives online by way of small cameras worn around their necks. Under the pretense of working for the users' benefits, the innovations and methods of the Circle promote "ultimate transparency" (69) and complete surveillance at the cost of users' privacy.

The Circle bears close resemblance to the concept of the panopticon (Axelrod; Charles), both in its virtual and real-life structures. Drawing on Jeremy Bentham's considerations of architectures that facilitate constant surveillance, Michel Foucault defines the panopticon as "a compact model of ... [a] disciplinary mechanism" (197). In more general words, panoptic structures empower certain individuals to constantly watch others and thereby to secure and institutionalize hegemonic order, all of which also holds true for the company presented in Eggers's narrative. At the Circle, these mechanisms are already part of the architectural appearance of the campus buildings: "the offices [are] fronted by floor-to-ceiling glass, the occupants visible within" (Eggers 7; see also Atwood; Tommasi 249). This design permits that the employees and their activities can be observed at all times. Also, the technologies used at the Circle record all of the employees' data, collect their personal information, and closely observe their online and offline activities. In its endeavor to make the world transparent, the company encourages and even tries to enforce such behavior also on a larger scale and uses technology to collect, store, and share all information world-wide.

As observed by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *The Circle* "raises disturbing questions about the end of privacy" (260), as it shows how constant surveillance renders privacy impossible. The Circle's tools not only capture incriminating material about people, but also make intimate information publicly known and easily accessible. In order to collect and provide "the accumulated knowledge of the world" (Eggers 302), the Circle introduces the motto "PRIVACY IS THEFT" (303), thereby insinuating that privacy is a concept that borders on the fringe of illegality. Having nearly eliminated privacy as a reasonable and rightful demand, the Circle's policies regulate how solitary and private experiences are shaped.

#### 4. Authentic Solitude Endangered by Social Media

One way in which Eggers's novel contributes to the discourse on solitude in the digital age is through its critical examination of "authentic solitude." Generally understood to be "based on the decision to be alone" (Averill and Sundararajan 91), authentic solitude describes voluntary and self-imposed withdrawal. Mae's personal development as projected throughout the narrative illustrates how experiences of self-chosen solitude can be altered, endangered, and ultimately destroyed by techno-scientific progress and constant surveillance.

Early on, the reader learns that Mae has for quite a while been implementing a form of authentic retreat into her life. Having been introduced to the sportive activity of kayaking by her ex-boyfriend, Mercer, Mae has turned solitary kayaking trips into one of her hobbies. It becomes clear that she often seeks the solitude the

activity offers her in order to flee from the stressors in her life such as the pressure put on her through her new job at the Circle, her father's multiple sclerosis, and the strained and somewhat complicated relationship she has with Mercer. The time she has to herself during these trips gives her the chance and freedom to relax and recuperate. Only then can she be completely "free of thoughts" (Eggers 145) and temporarily forget her troubles and worries. Voluntary solitude offers "a respite from the stresses of life" and provides people with time "for quiet contemplation" (Coplan and Bowker 3). It is in this way that Mae has integrated self-imposed solitude in her life, at least up to the point where her job interferes.

Soon after starting to work for the Circle, Mae leaves the campus to spend the weekend with her parents after her father had a seizure. On her way back, she goes kayaking in order to unwind and have some alone time. A couple of days later, her work supervisors confront Mae with her sudden disappearance from campus and her failure to participate in the Circle's social activities over the weekend. After explaining her situation, her supervisors encounter that it is of course "very understandable" (Eggers 178) that she wants to spend time with her parents but that they find it problematic that Mae did not "post anything ... about this episode" (183) on the Circle's social networking in order to "share it" with other Circlers (184). Learning about Mae's kayaking trip, her supervisors become even more irritated and criticize her of being "selfish" (187) because she has kept her hobby private. They call Mae's conduct "*sub*-social" (189) and explain to her that this kind of behavior runs counter to the Circle's ethos: the employees' "online presence [is] integral to [their] work" (95) and to the overall mission of complete transparency. On a more abstract level, the novel here insinuates that spending time alone in a collective system that expects its members to be social both physically and virtually at all times might not only be frowned upon but also even reprimanded.

In the long run, the pressure to always participate and to expose all aspects of one's private life influences and shapes one's personal downtime. In *The Circle*, this is illustrated when Mae once again goes kayaking and is being caught in the act by the Circle's SeeChange cameras. This time, her kayaking trip is illegal, as she takes one of the kayaks onto the bay after the opening hours of the shop. Ironically as well as tellingly, Mae is not primarily reproached for her violation of the law but for the fact that she did not document and share her trip online. One of the company's heads, Eamon Bailey, explains to her: "the point is that there are millions of people who can't see what you saw, Mae. Does it feel right to have deprived them of seeing what you saw?" (300). In order to educate the broad public about their mantra that "PRIVACY IS THEFT" (303), the Circle uses Mae's misconduct as a strategic marketing trick. They put her on a stage where

she has to repent in front of a large audience. On the one hand, this act of public shaming and humiliation is of course installed in order to show that the Circle's surveillance system has already advanced to a point where there is a good chance that people are observed at all times. This should lead to people's modification of their behavior. On the other hand, putting Mae on the pillory should deter people from indulging in similar and seemingly selfish behavior and discourage them from yielding to their desire to be alone (Williams).

These disciplinary actions profoundly affect Mae's overall social behavior. After having been chided for her allegedly antisocial conduct, she starts spending more time on campus, directs her attention to her PartiRank – one of the Circle's tools that rates the employees' participation on the social networking site –, and “[uses] every available moment of downtime to quickly scroll through [the site]” in order to partake in online activities (Eggers 104–05). Simultaneously, she gradually neglects her social and private life off-campus and offline and eventually gives up her kayak trips. In his review of the novel, Lev Grossman observes that Mae “spends her nights plowing through drifts of emails and posts and zings and her days sleepwalking through her real-life interactions with one eye always on her phone” so as to never be completely disconnected. The fact that she later even decides to go completely transparent – meaning that she wears a small camera around her neck wherever she goes – is merely the final touch within her development into the automaton-like proponent of the Circle. Over time, Mae willingly waives nearly all of her privacy and gives up her private life completely in favor of her online presence and the “validation” it offers her (Eggers 233; Tommasi 250). Being praised for her good work and for her dedication to the Circle makes her feel good about herself. She enjoys the reputation she has among her colleagues and among the users of the Circle's network worldwide. What is presented here actually mirrors trends that were observed by scholars and critics in the recent past: fervent users of social networking sites often put more effort into their online presence than into their real life relationships. The virtual community consequently “[becomes] very important to surfers' identities and their self-esteem” (Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider 319). Mae receives appreciation and recognition for her continuous online activity; meanwhile, her offline life gradually recedes. She loses touch with her parents, hardly spends time completely alone, and has even given up the rare periods of solitude she used to allow herself for recuperation and contemplation. Mae rejects alone time in favor of perfecting her online life and meeting the Circle's requirements. Simultaneously, the reader can closely observe how she steadily turns into a less rational and less considerate person who blindly devotes her time to an enterprise that devours all of her time and energy.

Not only does this narrative trajectory confirm Mark Andrejevic's observation that "new ... communication technologies ... have had a powerfully transformative effect on ... social relations" in general (8), but it also alludes to the corrosive effects of recent techno-scientific progress on the time people used to voluntarily retreat. Thanks to both the opportunity and the pressure to be online all the time, people now rarely seclude themselves. And even when they are physically alone, they are often in one way or another connected to the world through technological devices that promote constant communication and data exchange and thus simulate human contact. As a consequence, "the distinction between 'alone' and 'together' has become hopelessly blurry" (Neyfakh) and authentic and self-chosen solitude is becoming harder to reach and enjoy.

## 5. Solitude Generated through Social Media

Whilst Eggers's narrative explains how contemporary communication technologies may very well pose a danger to authentic solitude, it also provides food for thought on how exactly these same technologies can create another experience of solitude, namely in the sense of loneliness. Defined as "the *painful experience of being alone*" (Galanaki 71), loneliness might actually be the result of spending too much time in virtual environments at the cost of maintaining real life relationships. Of course, the virtual connections provided through social media networks simulate the feeling of company and communality and purport to their users that they are connected to other human beings (Turkle 1; Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider 330). Still, recent studies show that these virtual relationships are oftentimes of a lower and less intimate quality than their real life counterparts and, moreover, that online social networking platforms might potentially distract and even alienate users from their offline relationships (Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider 319, 330). Consequently, devoting oneself to the care of online contacts at the cost of offline relationships may lead to involuntary solitude and loneliness.

This scenario is also elaborated on in *The Circle*. Mae grows more socially reclusive as she dedicates more and more time to her presence on the Circle's social network. At one point in the narrative, the reader gets a vivid description of how Mae tries to improve her PartiRank by the end of one of her workdays:

[S]he embarked on a flurry of activity, sending four zings and thirty-two comments and eighty-eight smiles. In an hour, her PartiRank rose to 7,228. Breaking 7,000 was more difficult, but by eight o'clock, after joining and posting in eleven discussion groups, sending another twelve zings, ... and signing up for sixty-seven more feeds, she'd done it. She was at 6,872, and turned to her Inner-Circle social feed. She was a few hundred posts behind, and she made her way through, replying to seventy or so messages, RSVPing to eleven

events on campus, signing nine petitions, and providing comments and constructive criticism on four products ... By 10:16 her rank was 5,342. (Eggers 190)

I am quoting in length from the novel here for several reasons: for one, this passage illustrates how Eggers's writing style perfectly captures and encapsulates the said "flurry of activity" and thereby mimics the hectic frenzy Mae works herself into in order to meet the demands of the Circle's policy for the employees' online interaction. For another, this episode grants insights into how the pressure to adequately perform online interferes with Mae's personal life. Rather than relaxing by herself or socializing with real life contacts, Mae spends her time after work connected to the social network till late at night, which in turn leaves her in a liminal state with regard to companionship. Whilst she is not completely alone due to the fact that she is virtually connected to a multitude of other users, she is still all by herself in her room. Notwithstanding the illusion of being in contact with other people, it soon becomes clear that her online activities do not provide Mae with the same quality of real interpersonal contact. Given the fact that "most of the communication [on online social networks] is shallow" (Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider 330), it stands to reason that depriving oneself of authentic companionship in favor of solely engaging in virtually simulated contact might very well entail emotional repercussions. "Yet, suddenly, in the half-light of virtual community, we may feel utterly alone," Sherry Turkle comments (11–12), and this is exactly what happens to Mae.

Coinciding with her increasingly excessive online activity, Mae often feels a "black rip" and "loud tear" opening up within her (Eggers 195). In the course of the novel, the tear and the therein projected emptiness gradually intensify, and it becomes clear that the tear symbolically mirrors "the uncompromising bleakness" of the future (Ludwigs) and, more specifically, the emotional impoverishment of Mae's life. What she herself defines as a "wave of despair" (Eggers 195) can be easily decoded by the reader as the effect of her online behavior, which results in loneliness. After all, there is an ever-growing gap between Mae and her parents and also between her and Mercer, mostly because they antagonize Mae on the grounds of her overweening activities on the social network and her fervent and naive promotion of the Circle's goals. For Mae, the only way to handle the tear is to "stay busy" (196) and to "[work] through it" (412) – a coping mechanism that catapults her into a vicious circle. In order not to have to face her loneliness, Mae buries herself in online activities for which she receives validation from her company and the online community, but which ultimately lead her to isolate herself even more. Close to the end of the novel, when Mae has lost touch with almost all of her former close relationships and "the tear [opens] up in her again, larger and blacker than ever before" (465), she finds solace in the shallow and virtually

simulated support from the online community. It becomes clear that she has now completely abandoned her offline life in favor of being a showcase Circler.

What Eggers presents here is an illustration of how spending too much time online and relying too heavily on online social networks, which are generally considered to “[fight] loneliness” (Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider 330), can in fact create a rather negative experience of solitude: Mae’s behavior leads her into a state of “solitary confinement” (Atwood) and alienates her from real life contacts and meaningful companionship. On a more general level, it can be stated that social media environments may produce a form of solitude that results in both social and emotional reclusiveness, which in turn nurtures loneliness. In this vein, Eggers’s novel warns of the possible dangers of disproportionate virtual activities at the expense of authentic offline experiences and points out that virtually simulated companionship does not prevent people from feeling isolated, solitary, or lonely.

## 6. Deliberate Withdrawal and Political Reclusiveness in the Digital Age

In another plotline, *The Circle* addresses the issue of withdrawal from society to political ends. Mercer, who represents the mouthpiece for critical concerns about techno-scientific progress and the pressure to participate online (Axelrod; Galow 119), sees his only way of escaping the society that is more and more shaped and controlled by the Circle in deliberately distancing himself both emotionally as well as physically from said structures. In his main function as “one of the most vocal critics of the Circle, the death of privacy, and the way that social media has changed personal relationships” (Snow), Mercer contributes to the discourse on the downsides of a techno-communication-based society and moreover exemplifies how resistance to such trends might be registered by an environment that willingly succumbs to such structures.

The novel introduces Mercer as a down-to-earth character, who maintains a modest and simple lifestyle and who seems content with his existence. He is not interested in new communication technologies and online social networking. Even more so, he actually disapproves of these developments as he considers them a threat to traditional, authentic human contact and communication. Already at an early point in the narrative, Mercer expresses his dislike for the obsessive use of virtual communication and explains how the new technology interferes with interpersonal relationships: “It becomes like we’re never alone,” (Eggers 131; see also Snow) he observes during a conversation with Mae, who is constantly checking her messages on her phone. He then voices his critical opinions of the Circle’s modifications of interpersonal interaction: “the tools you guys create ... *manufacture* unnaturally extreme

social needs. No one needs the level of contact you're purveying" (133). Apart from being concerned about the infringements on privacy, the constant surveillance, and the monetization of information exercised by the Circle, Mercer mostly bemoans the loss of genuine communication and intimacy. To him, new communication technologies produce "socially autistic" people (260) and thus destroy experiences of authentic and meaningful interaction. Considering Mercer's attitude towards techno-scientific progress, it becomes clear that he "delivers the diagnosis of ... [the] condition" (Ludwigs) of a society under the pressure to perform online. He criticizes and aptly predicts the hollowness and superficiality of such communication (Galow 119).

His resistance to give in to the pressures of participating online is perceived as unprogressive, undemocratic, and "antisocial" (Eggers 462) behavior. In the course of the novel, Mae more than once goes over his head and tries to persuade him of the advantages of online social networking, but to no avail. After Mae decides to go transparent and Mercer recognizes the consequences of this act on the lives of the people around her, he severs all contact with her. Using a seemingly old-fashioned medium, namely a letter, he informs her that he does not want anything to do with her and other Circlers anymore on the grounds of the inhumanity of "this [insidious] tool" (368). When Mae still does not stop intervening in other peoples' lives and when the influence of the Circle has become almost inescapable, Mercer sends Mae a second letter. He explains that he will hide out in order to flee from the society the Circle has created: "By the time you read this, I'll be off the grid, and I ... *know* others will join me. We'll be living ... like refugees, or hermits" (432–33). Mercer's social withdrawal can be seen as a form of political expression or statement. As observed by Coby Dowdell with regard to early American culture, citizens have oftentimes "expressed their critical voices through voluntary reclusion from society" (121) in order to "[engage] in public deliberation from a position of physical retirement" (130). This is exactly what Mercer does. His hermitism expresses his political conviction and functions as a practice of active, yet tacit rebellion against prevailing societal structures. The fact that this act is not only personal but also in fact decidedly public and political becomes clear when considering that he is aware that his actions will be observed. Knowing that the broad public will not only have access to his letters but also witness his withdrawal because Mae broadcasts her life, he addresses not only Mae but also her whole "audience" (Eggers 366), namely all the Circlers. His letters take on the function of what Dowdell calls "the hermit's manuscript" (130). Generally speaking, the hermit's written account "presents a transcription of the internal political contemplation of the retired citizen for public consumption" (130). Mercer's letters reveal

his meditations and his political attitude and thereby function as a manifesto of his convictions against complete surveillance and simulated communication. Here, solitude is then implemented as a political tactic that clearly positions a person or a group of people in the matrix of possible opinions on social structures. The act of deliberately opting out of a system turns social withdrawal and the resulting solitude into a radically political statement.

Mercer's reclusiveness and pursuit of privacy elicit derogatory comments from Circlers all over the world. He is being referred to as "*Bigfoot*" and "*Sasquatch*" (Eggers 433), which shows that his resistance to online participation is construed as unprogressive and backwoods behavior. Furthermore, his withdrawal also arouses suspicion and irritation. Kenneth Rubin explains that members of a society are "likely ... to think unpleasant thoughts about ... solitary individuals," as their behavior might be interpreted as "unacceptable" and "discomforting" (xiv). This can clearly be seen in Mercer's case. On top of this, his actions are even perceived as antisocial and therefore undemocratic in the light of the Circle's goal of an all-encompassing participatory democracy. For Mae personally, Mercer's withdrawal also poses an annoyance and a personal attack. She simply cannot understand that he does not want to see the alleged benefits the Circle offers in her opinion and takes extreme measures to convert her ex-boyfriend. Shortly after his venture to the margins of society, Mae and the online community make use of the Circle's latest technologies, highly accurate search tools and drones, in order to locate Mercer's exact whereabouts. The relentless pursuit results in Mercer driving his car off a bridge in a rush of "unmitigated horror" (Eggers 458). Written off by the heads of the Circle as an act of "madness and paranoia" (463), Mercer's suicide can be seen as a politically motivated action. Rather than succumbing to pathological societal structures he does not want to be a part of, Mercer follows his convictions and demands his right to privacy in the most extreme way. He manages to evade the Circle's reach by making himself completely unavailable through death. His rather emblematic demise can easily be seen as the advancing disappearance of privacy and aloneness in the digital age. It alludes to recent concerns as to how the omnipresence of the internet and the possible inherent surveillance pose a serious threat to privacy and deliberate solitude and how it may consequently lead to their complete extinction.

## 7. Solitude in the Digital Age

Eggers's novel can be understood as a dystopian parable that elucidates how human life may be transformed in the age of ever-progressing technology (Charles; Galow 125–26; Ludwigs; Snow; Smith and Watson 260; Tommasi 251). On the one hand,

the narrative points out potential dangers of techno-scientific developments on an individual level. It shows how excessive fixation on online presentation might negatively influence an individual's identity-development. After all, Mae steadily and inexorably turns into a rather shallow and one-dimensional character in the face of her online participation. Furthermore, the novel illustrates how surveillance prompted by social media might heavily infringe on people's privacy. On the other hand, *The Circle* focuses on how society at large might be altered by social media by showing how interpersonal dynamics and relationships might become superficial and how quasi-mandatory online participation might result in a society that resembles "a totalitarian regime" (Snow).

Imagining a setting in which social media surveys, controls, and even dictates private lives and social interaction, Eggers's novel chimes in with timely considerations of how experiences of aloneness and solitude might be altered by continuous availability and the pressure to participate in online interaction. Equipped with "a healthy dose of authentic alarm" (Axelrod), the narrative probes stimulating questions of how common experiences of authentic solitude are changed, if not even endangered and destroyed by techno-scientific progress and how social media environments may in fact create other forms of solitude in terms of loneliness. Moreover, it depicts how deliberate reclusiveness might not only be regarded as an irritation but even as completely unacceptable behavior that needs to be prevented in social structures that build on connectedness and communality. All in all, *The Circle* invites the reader to critically consider the implications of new technology. In our contemporary society, where aloneness has come to be a rare experience and where solitary activities steadily fade more into the background of human existence, there is good reason to ponder the question "if the experience of solitude is ... doomed to become an archaic remnant of a past era" (Coplan and Bowker 11). Rather than providing the reader with a concrete answer to this question, *The Circle* sketches out possible and rather unsettling scenarios of how the progress of technology might affect our lives. Striking an extremely topical chord, Eggers's novel not only critically comments on the promotion of complete transparency, but also engages in an intriguing and intricate discourse on possible future shapes of solitude.

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Scott Slovic

# Going Away to the Wilderness for Solitude ... and Community: Ecoambiguity, the Engaged Pastoral, and the ‘Semester in the Wild’ Experience

**Abstract:** We often associate wilderness experience with solitude. In reality, we go into the wild in order to think more deeply about society. This article considers ecoambiguity and the engaged pastoral in the context of world literature and the University of Idaho’s ‘Semester in the Wild’ program, which sends students into the wilderness for two months.

## 1. Ecoambiguity and the Engaged Pastoral

One of the first lessons of ecological experience is that of relationship. Try as we might to leave society behind, we always carry its intellectual trappings with us, and we forge new societies, new networks of interaction, no matter where we go. This is not a bad thing. The hermetic myth offers an alluring vision of simplicity and perspective and focused commitment in such narratives as Kamo no Chomei’s “An Account of My Hut” (“Hojoki,” 1212) and E.J. (Ted) Banfield’s *Confessions of a Beachcomber* (1908). In the American context, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) and his many-volume personal journal are among the literary icons of solitary retreat.

But relationship is the abiding motif in all of these works – Chomei could not fully abandon the political complications of urban Japan. Banfield and Thoreau established relationships with Dunk Island on the North Queensland coast and Walden Pond in suburban Boston, respectively – and they often thought about the behavior of fellow human beings even as they patrolled the woods and beaches of their isolated geographies. Ecocritic Karen L. Thornber uses the term “ecoambiguity” to describe this sense of relationship, of community, while in conditions of solitude – and to explain other forms of environmental irony. I tend to think about the social engagement that occurs when writers experience isolated places as examples of what I call the “engaged pastoral,” a mode of pastoral experience that enhances a sense of connection to society rather than emphasizing withdrawal from society.

These threads of ironic ecoambiguity and the engaged pastoral occur not only in the few examples mentioned above but throughout the field of environmental

literature. Joshua DiCaglio's article "Ironic Ecology" (2015) highlights irony as a central feature of recent American environmental narrative, pointing to such examples as David Gessner's adoption of the pose of wilderness adventurer when describing his experience of canoeing down the Charles River in urban Boston. DiCaglio argues ultimately that the function of irony in environmental narrative is to "disperse" isolated, individualized identities by blurring boundaries between wilderness and city, otherness and self:

[P]opular environmental rhetoric tends to describe the displacement of the human while struggling to describe the fragmentation implied by ecological dispersal. I can more easily acknowledge my role in a network of relations; I find it more difficult to see how that network of relations implies that what I consider "me" (and "human") cannot be limited by or contained within any clear boundary. However, the implications of ecology are not fully realized without both conclusions; in fact, ... the failure to acknowledge the second conclusion underlies much of the confusion currently facing environmental rhetoric .... Irony in recent nature writing functions to overcome the resistance that those familiar with environmental discourse have developed toward the deeper implications of the identity-dispersing reality of ecological thinking. (451)

What may seem at first glance to be comically ironic inconsistency in a literary narrative – the hermit who cannot leave behind his obsessions with political life back in the city, the urban recreationalist who fancies himself a heroic explorer in the dangerous wilderness – can also be viewed as experimentation with boundary-breaking, which may be an essential verbal and psychological process in pursuit of integrating the individual with the collective, the human with the non-human.

In this article, I would like to consider a form of pedagogical ecoambiguity and the engaged pastoral in the context of the University of Idaho's 'Semester in the Wild' Program, which sends approximately a dozen undergraduates deep into the wilderness of the American West, where they spend two and a half months living at a research station while taking a full schedule of classes, ranging from ecology to environmental writing. Many students are attracted to the program because of the allure of quiet solitude in a beautiful wilderness – they imagine themselves "front[ing] only the essential facts of life" (90), as Thoreau put it in *Walden*, and breaking through the buffers of twenty-first-century civilization to learn the realities of ecology. Some of this does happen. But the students and professors who participate in 'Semester in the Wild' also learn a lot about getting along (and sometimes not getting along) with other people, and about establishing other kinds of social relationships (including participation in the process of forming public policy), during the semester-long adventure in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness. Careful reading of Chomei, Banfield, Thoreau, and other writers of exurban retreat could have predicted this. Keeping DiCaglio's notion of

“ironic ecology” in mind, though, may reveal that even in the surprisingly anthropocentric social experience that occurs during ‘Semester in the Wild,’ the students are experiencing boundary-blurring relationships that contribute to their newly open sensitivity to wilderness ecology and the role of humans within such systems.

## 2. Chomei and the Ironic Persistence of Community

Perhaps the most forceful demonstration of irony in recent environmental discourse is Thornber’s *Ecoambiguity*, her study of environmental crises in East Asian literatures. Swarnalatha Rangarajan, Vidya Sarveswaran, and I summarized this project as follows in our introduction to *Ecoambiguity, Community, and Development: Toward a Politicized Ecocriticism* (2014):

The opening example of “ecoambiguity” in Karen Thornber’s 2012 book ... describes a situation in contemporary Japan where a local tourism association at Shosen Gorge sought to cut down trees “so that people could have a better view of ‘nature’” (1). In the case of Shosen Gorge, an economically depressed region that relies on income from tourists, visitors are particularly keen to have unobstructed views of the spectacular rocky cliffs, so the natural vegetation has been targeted for cutting in order to facilitate an aesthetic or touristic experience. Essentially what Thornber is describing is a cultural tendency to selectively appreciate and resist the natural world, seeking to control our experience and the natural environment as a way of maximizing a desired mode of experience. In many other parts of Asia and the rest of the world, the irony of ecoambiguity is more painful and acute. (vii)

One of the strongest impressions conveyed by Thornber’s project is the idea that inconsistency in human relationships with the non-human world are nothing new. There has always been a human tendency to struggle with ambivalence, with conflicting impulses and concerns. She reveals this ironic inconsistency in copious examples, perhaps none more vivid than the case of Chomei (1155–1216), the author of the classic work of Japanese literature titled “Hojoki” (1212), which describes Chomei’s retreat to a ten-foot hut in the mountains outside of Kyoto after various disasters have devastated the city. Although Chomei declares his special devotion to nature, he also writes famously in “Hojoki”: “when I return and sit here I feel pity for those still attached to the world of dust” (211).

Again and again, the hermit Chomei turns his thoughts toward the city he has left behind, his physical solitude betraying an ongoing psychological attachment to community. We might refer to this tendency to retreat to a locus of rural solitude in order to contemplate the social concerns (and even political crises) of the urban community as a kind of engaged pastoral. Rather than using retreat as an opportunity to disengage and relish solitary peace of mind, just the opposite occurs – or

rather, in addition to the solace that might come with focused contemplation of one's immediate surroundings, stepping back physically from the complications of the urban setting facilitates clear-sighted analysis of society.

### 3. Thoreauvian Engagement

Centuries later, in the United States, Thoreau famously struggled to balance solitude and community during his two-year experiment in attentive living at Walden Pond on the outskirts of Boston (1845–1847) and throughout his life. In 1954, on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Walden*, E.B. White articulated Thoreau's profoundly contradictory devotion to private enjoyment of nature and to social engagement:

Henry went forth to battle when he took to the woods, and *Walden* is the report of a man torn by two powerful and opposing drives – the desire to enjoy the world (and not be derailed by a mosquito wing) and the urge to set the world straight. One cannot join these two successfully, but sometimes, in rare cases, something good or even great results from the attempt of the tormented spirit to reconcile them. (238)

What White describes here is essentially the paradox of Thoreau's engaged pastoral sensibility. It is true that Thoreau's social engagement emerges most prominently in distinct works such as "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849), which are clearly separate from his natural-history-focused journal and his nature-oriented essays. But in his best-known book, *Walden*, Thoreau does in fact display a twin sensibility, a simultaneous engagement with private life close to nature and with human society. Even when he is alone in the relatively rural setting of Concord, Massachusetts, Thoreau writes as if he has not abandoned society. So content was Thoreau in his solitary observations of nature in suburban Boston that he did not feel he was alone when he lacked human companionship. He devotes an entire chapter of *Walden*, titled "Solitude," to the idea of solitary community, which is akin to the ecoambiguity Thornber discusses in her book.

The following passage on lonesomeness and community suggests that Thoreau required no human company in order to feel at home in nature:

I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life ... In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood

insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. (131–32)

This feeling of infinitely vast friendliness seems to be a form of the dispersed identity DiCaglio describes in his recent study. The irony of being isolated from fellow humans but immersed in a community of fellow natural beings is perhaps different than the specific varieties of ecoambiguity Thornber identifies in *Ecoambiguity*, but it prefigures the communitarian experience of wilderness that occurs during the ‘Semester in the Wild’ program. Likewise, students in ‘Semester in the Wild,’ in learning to raise their voices to address the pressing issues of society, participate in the tradition of the engaged pastoral, retreating into the wilderness for a brief period in order to see and understand human culture more clearly.

Some two decades after the publication of *Walden* on the other side of the planet, the Australian nature-lover and author Banfield set out to live a solitary life in nature on one of Australia’s eastern barrier islands, inspired by the iconoclastic American. His biographer, Michael Noonan, records Banfield’s quest in *A Different Drummer: The Story of E.J. Banfield, Beachcomber of Dunk Island* (1986): “Thoreau wrote: ‘How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book.’ The book in Ted Banfield’s case was, of course, Thoreau’s *Walden* . . . , and he carried a copy of it with him when he set out from Arafat in the late 1870s . . .” (37). And states further: “After deciding that Tam O’Shanter Point, being still part of the mainland, just did not have the atmosphere of isolation he was seeking, Ted headed out to Timana . . .” (96). In the end, Banfield found the isolated, Thoreauvian locale he was seeking on Dunk Island, off the coast of Queensland in the northeast of Australia. But he also found the paradoxical combination of Thoreau’s hermetic naturalist lifestyle and his sensibility as an activist-writer whose pastoral existence included engagement in social issues. In some of his writing, such as “The Gentle Art of Beachcombing” (1913), Banfield waxed poetic about the “sweetness and satisfaction” of enjoying the sound of the wind in the trees, “humming accompaniment to the measured cadences of old ocean, and the tree of beautiful leave . . . will waft pure and refreshing scent from flowers of milk-white and gold” (155). At other times, as in his piece “Ruthless Collectors” (1912), the writer railed against people who went to the bush to collect birds for their colorful plumage, complaining that, “being destroyers of birds they should be regarded as the most direful pest of the country breeds” (146). As I have described in my article “Epistemology and Politics in American Nature Writing” (1996), it is in the solipsistic rhapsodies and socially engaged jeremiads of Banfield’s work that we can find traces of familiar epistemological and political tropes, transferred from North American literature, such as Thoreau’s work, to island writing in the Southern Hemisphere.

#### 4. Engaged Citizenship, the ‘Semester in the Wild’ Program, and the Idea of a Community of Students and Professors in the Wilderness

My own life as a teacher, literary essayist, and scholar working in the environmental humanities takes much of its combined emphasis on loving the world and fighting to address matters of concern from the tendencies I have inherited from intellectual ancestors such as Chomei, Thoreau, and Banfield. I have described these impulses at length in the essay “Savoring, Saving, and the Practice of Ecocritical Responsibility” in my book *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility* (2008):

What I want myself is to find some way to balance the urge to *savor* and the urge to *save*, the impulse to enjoy life and the commitment to do some good in the world. Looking back on years of writing and lecturing in the field of ecological literary studies ... it becomes clear to me that much of my own work wavers between these two poles of responsibility ... the responsibility (shared by every living organism) to be fully present in *this life* and the responsibility (of a privileged, empowered human citizen) to be involved with the transgressions and the opportunities of my community. My writing demonstrates a vacillation between various forms of engagement and retreat, all in pursuit of “responsibility,” in quest of meaningful *responses* to the world as I experience it and gather information about it. (3)

To a certain degree, my own effort to bring together savoring and saving is a familiar dimension of ecocritical praxis. Other scholars in the field, such as Lawrence Buell and Michael P. Cohen, have recognized that ecocritical research is “usually energized by environmental concern” (Buell 97) and that ecocriticism “wants to know but also wants to do. Ecocriticism needs to inform personal and political actions” (Cohen 27). More recently, Polish ecocritic Wojciech Malecki, building on the tradition of pragmatist philosophy and the writings of Richard Rorty, has argued in “Save the Planet on Your Own Time? Ecocriticism and Political Practice” (2012) that socially engaged ecocriticism of the type that I describe and demonstrate in *Going Away to Think* is an appropriate convergence of professional and political activity to achieve what Rorty describes as “real politics, i.e., participating in demonstrations, supporting financially the political organization or party you find the most useful, or writing letters of protest to officials” (49). In 2012, when I moved from the University of Nevada, Reno, to the University of Idaho, I began working with my new colleagues in Idaho to develop a special program for undergraduate students at the Taylor Wilderness Research Station in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness of central Idaho, the largest wilderness area in North America south of Alaska, and one of my goals in the environmental writing class was, in a nutshell, to introduce my students to the experience of the

engaged pastoral, to help them appreciate their remote, solitary experience in a vast wilderness, and to empower them to use their writing and speaking voices to engage with matters that concern them back in society.

Located in the heart of the Frank Church Wilderness, a 2,366,757-acre roadless area that was established in central Idaho in 1980, the Taylor Wilderness Research Station is the former homestead of a hunter and trapper named Cougar Dave Lewis (1855–1936), who, as described in Pat Cary Peek's *Cougar Dave: Mountain Man of Idaho* (2004), could be labeled a mountain hermit. Lewis arrived in the Big Creek area, fifteen kilometers from the confluence with the Middle Fork of the Salmon River, in 1879 and lived there in almost complete isolation, with his dogs, until his death in 1936. Jess Taylor (after whom the property was named) purchased the ranch from Lewis in 1935. In the late 1960s, University of British Columbia mountain lion researcher Maurice Hornocker went to Taylor Ranch to conduct his doctoral research. When the property came up for sale as he was completing his thesis, Hornocker convinced the University of Idaho to purchase the land and the handful of rustic cabins as a future research station – this happened in 1970.

The University of Idaho had owned the Taylor Wilderness Research Station for more than forty years when I arrived in 2012, but it had not yet developed an actual curriculum for undergraduates. The facility had been used mostly by graduate students and faculty members to conduct research on bighorn sheep, elk, wolves, mountain lions, rattlesnakes, salmon and steelhead, and larger ecological topics. I worked with stream ecologists, specialists in wilderness policy and management, botanists, wildlife experts, historians, and literary critics to develop the curriculum for the new program that we called 'Semester in the Wild.' Our plan was for twelve to seventeen students to travel to Taylor for a full autumn semester each year (about two and a half months), where they would live in tents or cabins, cook together, and study a complete set of courses (fifteen to seventeen credits) in a range of disciplines. It would be similar to studying abroad, except that these students would need backpacks and hiking boots instead of passports. The program was launched in the fall of 2013 with eleven students, and as I write this article, we are preparing to welcome our fourth group of 'Semester in the Wild' students in for the Fall of 2016 semester.

As I have suggested above, this unique academic program reinforces Thornber's concept of ecoambiguity and my own idea of the engaged pastoral. Students may anticipate their 'Semester in the Wild' experience as being one of lonely isolation in the backcountry, but in fact they spend much of their time in a richly social environment, together with a group of fellow students who quickly come to resemble a large family of brothers and sisters. They also get to know their professors, who fly in to the research station on tiny bush planes each week to work, hike, and cook with them, much better than they know their professors back at the university.

When professors are not at the research station, the students are accompanied by the station managers, Pete and Meg Gag and their six-year-old daughter Tehya, who live in one of the cabins and keep track of all aspects of the station, including the comings and goings of researchers and students. There are certainly opportunities for solitude at Taylor, and students take advantage of the chance to climb nearby mountains and fish for cutthroat trout and whitefish in the Big Creek River that flows through the station. But most of the time they are immersed in a culture of solitude that consists of a community of students and professors living in temporary isolation from mainstream society. There is no telephone access to society and only limited internet capacity, but news still makes its way daily to the station and paper letters and packages arrive each Wednesday morning on the mail plane, along with groceries. The station is located some two hundred kilometers from the nearest small town and is not reachable by automobiles – only by plane, on horseback, or on foot. The students themselves hike in to the station at the beginning of their experience, studying river ecology along the way.

I teach a course on environmental writing each fall as one of the five courses in the program. We begin by working on the ‘building blocks’ of what I call ‘the personal essay of environmental experience,’ studying the work of Scott Russell Sanders, Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, and Barry Lopez, among others, as the students practice small descriptive, narrative, and reflective writing exercises aimed at deepening their attentiveness to the place itself. Often I team-teach these early units of my class with colleagues who are ethnobotanists or ornithologists, and they lend their scientific expertise to our discussions about writing carefully and vividly about the natural world. In order to quickly ramp up my students’ awareness of the power of words, I engage them in an activity at the beginning of each day that I call ‘wrapping ourselves in language.’ We are not in a particular hurry because I have come to work with the students for several days (sometimes for an entire week), and ours is the only class happening during this time period. So we spend an hour or so each morning, reading a book aloud to each other as we sit on a mountainside, gradually warming up in the rising sun. One year we read Bruce Chatwin’s *In Patagonia* (1977) together, each student and teacher reading a paragraph or two and then passing the book to the next classmate. Last year we used Terry Tempest Williams’s *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-Four Variations on Voice* (2012) as our warm-up text. Even this reading-aloud exercise is a simultaneously individual and collective activity, each student projecting her or his voice alone to the community but also listening carefully to the voices of the other readers and to the words selected by the author. We learn the sound of our own voice and the sounds of our companions’ voices through such reading – and we develop the habit of listening deeply to language, which is a new focus for some of these students (fig. 1).

I typically visit the students in the wilderness for two week-long, intensive stints. The first week focuses on the personal essay of environmental experience, the second unit on writing vividly about abstractions (scientific, political, or philosophical ideas). The students, who entered the wilderness in late August at the beginning of our academic year, leave the wilderness in early November when winter begins in the mountains of the Frank Church Wilderness. We bring them up to Moscow, Idaho, in the northern part of the state, where the University of Idaho main campus is located. The university allows the 'Semester in the Wild' students to de-compress gradually from their wilderness isolation by giving them a house to stay in on Moscow Mountain, about twenty minutes' drive from campus. At the Twin Larch Retreat (the name of the house), the students complete their final projects for their various 'Semester in the Wild' classes, including the last few projects for our writing class. The third and final unit of my environmental writing class involves preparations for the group public presentation that the students will offer on campus on the last day of the program and also the writing of a 'personal testimony' on some topic of interest and concern (fig. 2).

I consider the personal testimonies to be a vital culmination of the 'Semester in the Wild' experience. The students and I begin talking about these while we are still in the wilderness, using our isolation in the wild mountains as an opportunity to think about matters of concern back in society. Free from the hectic pressures of daily life in the city, students seem able to reflect more deeply about what really matters in their lives. They come up with such topics as the importance of developing organic gardens on their home campuses (either the University of Idaho campus or the campus where they normally study – approximately half of the 'Semester in the Wild' students come from other universities in the United States or abroad) or the need to protect predators (such as wolves or sharks) in order to preserve the health of ecosystems. The most important thing, from my perspective, is that the students are learning to use their writing and public speaking in order to imagine themselves as engaged citizens. They can draw on their growing confidence as writers to craft letters to the editor for local or national newspapers or magazines or websites or to prepare oral testimony for public meetings on their campuses or in their cities. Only a few of the students may go on in their lives to be professional writers, but all of them have the potential to live their lives as engaged community members, making a difference in the creation of reasonable public policy by showing up at meetings and offering thoughtful opinions. But in order to make a difference in this way, they must have some confidence in their ability to write and speak publicly.

I see a direct intellectual through-line from Chomei, Thoreau, and Banfield to my students in the twenty-first-century American academic program that we call 'Semester in the Wild.' Thornber's ecoambiguity and my own concept of the engaged

pastoral point to the ironic revelation that learning to write and speak well while living in the remote wilderness is important to students' lives back in society. The relative solitude of the wilderness setting contributes to students' appreciation of the social purpose of their university education. In wilderness solitude, students develop not only a sense of the value of meaningful community, but a hunger to contribute to society through the careful exertion of their own writing and speaking voices.

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**Figures**

*Fig. 1. Scott Slovic teaching at the Taylor Wilderness Research Station in central Idaho.*



Photo: Sadie Grossbaum

*Fig. 2. An engaged student presents her personal testimony.*



Photo: Scott Slovic

Robert J. Coplan and Julie C. Bowker

# Should We Be Left Alone? Psychological Perspectives on the Implications of Seeking Solitude

**Abstract:** This essay reviews psychological perspectives on the costs and benefits of solitude. We conclude that solitude is more likely to be problematic when arising from a choice to avoid social interaction (e.g., social anxiety) and more likely to confer benefits when resulting from a preference to approach the desired state of spending time alone.

## 1. Psychological Views of Solitude

Psychology is the scientific study of human behavior. Psychology researchers explore a wide range of factors that may serve to underlie both normative and atypical behaviors, from emotions and unconscious processes, to cognitions and motivations, from genetics and the neurochemistry of the brain, to family and culture. In this chapter, we provide an overview and synthesis of psychological perspectives on the implications of the human behavior of 'seeking solitude.'

In many ways, the experience of solitude is an ideal topic for psychological inquiry. First, it is a ubiquitous phenomenon across the lifespan and across the globe. As well, our emotions, cognitions, and even our neurochemistry impact upon our desires, motivations, and decisions to seek out aloneness. Moreover, there is also a wide range of subjective reactions, responses, and consequences to spending time alone. This has made solitude a topic of interest for many sub-disciplines of psychology – which in turn reflect multiple and competing perspectives and approaches.

For example, developmental psychologists have considered both the costs and benefits of solitude from early childhood to adulthood (Rubin and Coplan). Social psychologists have emphasized that affiliation with others is a basic human need (Baumeister and Leary), and neuroscientists have shown that loneliness is not only bad for our well-being, but can also take a toll on our physical health (Cacioppo and Patrick). Notwithstanding, personality psychologists have identified individuals that are often happier when spending time alone (Leary, Herbst, and McCrary). However, the extreme pursuit of solitude is considered by clinical psychologists a symptom of mental health disorders (American Psychological Association).

We begin with a brief description of the definitions and key concepts that will set the scope of our review of the psychological study of solitude. This is followed

by a brief synthesis of the major psychological perspectives espousing both the costs and benefits of seeking solitude. We finish with a consideration of the critical importance of context, which serves to mitigate the implications of spending time alone and raises many questions for future research.

## 2. All Alone? Key Concepts and Considerations

Given the enormous breadth and volume of psychological studies that can be broadly related to the concept of solitude, we begin this chapter by proving the definitions and key concepts that serve to set the scope for this essay. In this regard, we focus on three important definitional and conceptual distinctions: (1) physical vs. perceived experiences of solitude; (2) social withdrawal vs. active isolation; and (3) normative behaviors vs. psychopathology.

### 2.1 Physical versus Perceived Solitude

In common conversation, the word ‘solitude’ may evoke images of being marooned on a desert isle or the lone occupant of a lighthouse shining a beacon to sea during a tempest. These descriptive exemplars emphasize solitude as a physical separation from others. In this essay, consistent with the conceptualization of solitude provided by Reed Larson, we focus instead on self-perceived separation (“Solitary Side”). This approach acknowledges that there will be occasions when although we may be in physical proximity with others, we will remain socially, communicatively, and emotionally detached (i.e., alone in a crowd). Accordingly, solitude is often construed, at least in part, as a function of an individual’s internal states, including cognitions, affects, and motivations.

For example, a young child in a crowded preschool playroom who is observed to be engaged in building a block tower but not paying attention to other children nearby, would be considered to be displaying solitary play (Coplan). Adolescents often report feeling alone and lonely even when they are in the presence of family or peers (van Roekel et al.). Similarly, in the study of solitude and isolation among the elderly, there is a growing call to move beyond objective criteria and assessments, such as living alone, to more subjective considerations, such as perceived social connectedness with family and community (Wethington and Pillemer).

Larson further points out that according to his definition, an individual would not be considered alone if they were at home by themselves but talking to someone on the phone (“Solitary Side”). Thus, just as we can sometimes be considered alone in the presence of others, physical separation from others does not always imply solitude. Larson also suggests that if the individual home by themselves

was watching television or listening to music, they would be alone because, under these circumstances, there would be no demands or expectations for social responsiveness. However, as we will discuss in a later section, rapidly changing contemporary technologies related to computer-mediated communication and social networking are challenging our notions of what it means to be alone (Turkle). Notwithstanding, our conceptualization of solitude would be best described as more akin to a state of mind than to a state of being.

## 2.2 Social Withdrawal versus Active Isolation

Timothy Wilson and colleagues conducted a series of studies where they asked college students to spend a short period of time (between 6 and 14 minutes, depending upon the specific study) alone in an unadorned room, without cell phones, writing implements, or any such additional materials. Participants were asked to spend the time entertaining themselves with their thoughts, and the only rules were that they needed to remain in their seats and awake. Afterwards, these students were asked questions about their perceptions of this experience (e.g., how enjoyable it was, how hard it was to concentrate) and then given choices between either repeating the experience or engaging in other potentially more positive or negative tasks. The results were unequivocal. As a group, participants did not enjoy being forced to sit alone with their thoughts, even for this relatively brief period of time. Not surprisingly, students reported a clear preference for engaging in a neutral or positive activity (e.g., reading a book, listening to music) rather than continuing to sit alone and unoccupied. However, the majority of participants also actually elected to receive electric shocks rather than sit alone again with nothing to do.

The design of this study confounds the physical context of being alone with a lack of external stimulation (i.e., the experience of boredom). Notwithstanding, it is a striking illustration of how we do not like having solitude forced upon us. With this in mind, our next consideration is whether the source of one's solitude is external versus internal. For example, one manner in which someone may end up spending considerable time alone is *vis-à-vis* social isolation, a process whereby individuals are forced into solitude because they are rejected and ostracized by others (Rubin and Mills). As a result of disastrous historical circumstances such as the tragedy of the Romanian orphanages, psychology researchers have demonstrated the profound and life-long destructive consequences of extreme social isolation, neglect, and deprivation (Nelson, Fox, and Zeanah). There is also a considerable body of research demonstrating that the day-to-day experiences of being socially excluded and rejected by one's peers is damaging to our psychological and physical

well-being, throughout childhood and adolescence (Rubin, Bukowski, and Bowker) and among adults (Williams and Nida). However, for our purposes, we are primarily concerned with social withdrawal, the process where individuals remove themselves (for one reason or another) from opportunities for social interaction (Rubin, Coplan, and Bowker).

Psychology researchers have examined a variety of reasons why individuals may seek out solitude, including the desire for privacy (Pedersen), the pursuance of religious experiences (Hay and Morisy), enjoyment of leisure activities (Purcell and Keller), and avoiding upsetting situations (Larson, "Solitary Side"). As we discuss in a later section, the implications of social withdrawal for our well-being are closely tied to our motivations for seeking solitude. For example, choosing to spend time alone can be restorative for individuals with an affinity for solitude (Hills and Argyle). In contrast, for those who desire social contact but retreat to solitude because of feelings of social fear and anxiety, being alone can lead to increased loneliness, worry, and depression (Brown et al.).

### **2.3 Normative Behaviors vs. Psychopathology**

Finally, from the perspective of clinical psychology, excessive solitude is often considered a behavioral manifestation of psychopathology. For example, extreme social avoidance is a behavioral characteristic of several clinically-diagnosed mental health disorders, including social anxiety disorder (Rao et al.), avoidant personality disorder (Westen and Shedler), and schizophrenia (Hansen et al.). For the purposes of this chapter, we focus primarily on the psychological study of solitude within the (still very wide) confines of normative behaviors.

## **3. Costs of Solitude**

As we have already indicated, being forced into solitude is not only an experience that few people enjoy, but such social isolation also has substantive negative implications for our well-being. However, it is also important to note that choosing to spend time alone does not always have positive implications.

For example, shy and socially anxious individuals may retreat into solitude despite strong desires for social interaction (Asendorpf). A shy child, for instance, may be motivated and interested in playing with others, but at the same time, these social situations also evoke feelings of social fear, unease, and self-consciousness. Thus, even when given opportunities to interact with peers, negative thoughts and feelings often cause shy and anxious individuals to avoid social situations and withdraw into solitude.

Unfortunately however, choosing to spend time alone appears to do little to alleviate shy and socially anxious individuals' psychological distress. Indeed, a degenerative cycle may ensue whereby shyness and social withdrawal lead to negative psychological outcomes such as loneliness and depression, which in turn exacerbate feelings of shyness and heighten social withdrawal (Gazelle and Ladd; Gazelle and Rudolph). Why might this be the case? Recall that although shy and socially anxious individuals are fearful and self-conscious about social interactions and relationships, they do generally want to interact with others. Thus, it is likely that their withdrawal into solitude interferes with the fulfillment of their social needs and desires, which in turn leads to increasing psychological distress (Baumeister and Leary). Moreover, when shy and socially anxious individuals do interact and form relationships with peers and romantic partners, such relationship experiences are oftentimes plagued by negative and challenging interactions. This, in turn, often further strengthens tendencies to socially withdraw and contributes to psychological ill-being (Oh et al.).

Indeed, extreme shyness in childhood is one of the strongest risk factors predicting later more serious mental health problems, such as social anxiety disorder (Chronis-Tuscano et al.). Also of concern are the strong linkages between shyness, social anxiety, and heightened feelings of 'loneliness.' Not only is chronic loneliness damaging to psychological well-being, but there is also a growing literature linking it to negative health outcomes (e.g., high cardiovascular activation, sleep dysfunction, obesity) throughout the life-span (Cacioppo and Patrick). In this regard, loneliness is conceptualized as a persistent form of social stress, which can lead to long-term negative physiological effects (e.g., increased levels of cortisol). Thus, it does not appear that shy and socially anxious individuals experience many benefits from spending time in solitude despite choosing solitude over social interaction.

In other cases, individuals may seek solitude because they desire and enjoy the experience of being alone (Coplan, Ooi, and Nocita). Such unsociable (or socially disinterested) individuals may not mind being with others (and will not specifically turn down or refuse attractive social invitations), but if given the choice, are often happy spending time alone. Thus, in this context, seeking solitude can be conceptualized as an affinity for aloneness (Goossens), rather than an avoidance of (stressful) social contexts.

It seems clear that we would be less concerned about the negative implications of solitude under these circumstances. Indeed, initial evidence suggests that as compared to those who seek solitude because of shyness and social anxiety, unsociability and an affinity for aloneness appear to be comparatively benign during childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood (Bowker and Raja; Coplan, Ooi, and

Nocita; Nelson). However, some psychological theory does suggest that excessive time spent alone, even under these relatively benign conditions, may still carry some costs. For example, it has long been argued that spending too much time alone in childhood may take away from important opportunities to engage with and learn from peers. Jean Piaget posited that peers provide a unique developmental context in which children and adolescents learn how to deal with conflict, how to compromise and negotiate, and how to perspective-take (or to understand the perspective of others). Other psychological theories emphasize the special importance of close relationships to fulfill social needs, such as the belongingness hypothesis (Baumeister and Leary) and the interpersonal theory of psychiatry (Sullivan). Extrapolating from this, the failure to satisfy our needs for intimacy, companionship, and acceptance is thought to lead to psychological maladjustment. Implicit in all of these theories is that individuals who fail to interact with others in meaningful ways (even if it is because they simply prefer to spend time alone) may miss out on important developmental opportunities and suffer psychologically.

#### **4. Benefits of Solitude**

Of course, a discussion of the potential costs of solitude should be balanced by a consideration of the positive aspects of spending time alone. Psychological researchers have highlighted theoretical perspectives, and provide some empirical support, for the unique affordances of solitude (Burger; Larson, "Solitary Side"; Long et al.). For example, it has been suggested that experiences in solitude can provide a unique context for self-exploration and self-reflection, both of which are considered necessary for psychological health (Goossens). It has also been argued that solitude affords a distinctive context in which individuals can develop (and excel) intellectually, creatively, and spiritually (Long et al.). As well, scholars have emphasized the restorative features of certain types of solitude (e.g., being alone in nature) that can allow individuals to experience stress reduction and self-renewal (Korpela and Staats).

In support of these notions, research has linked certain forms of self-imposed solitude to numerous indices of psychological health and well-being. For instance, Larson found that adolescents who spent moderate amounts of time in solitude reported more positive psychological adjustment relative to those who spent no time and those who spent large amounts of time alone ("Emergence of Solitude"). Conversely, an aversion to solitude has also been negatively associated with creative talents and pursuits, likely because some solitude is required for the free-flowing thoughts and ideas, as well as the development and practice of many musical and artistic skills (e.g., playing a musical instrument; Csikszentmihalyi).

In terms of the engagement in specific solitary activities, constructive forms of solitude (e.g., reading, writing, collecting) have been linked with higher levels of psychological well-being (Adams, Leibbrandt, and Moon; Tinsley et al.). Perhaps due to the well-documented relaxation, healing, and restorative benefits of communing with nature, spending time in outdoor recreation and alone in nature are also consistently associated with positive well-being (Nisbet, Zelenski, and Murphy). Finally, there is some recent evidence that solitary time spent on the internet and communication-devices is related to decreases in perceived stress and loneliness (Teppers et al.). Of course, it is important to emphasize that it has been suggested that certain individuals may benefit the most from solitary experiences, such as those with strong preferences for solitude and introverted personalities (Burger; Teppers et al.).

The aforementioned research focused on community (non-clinical) samples of adolescents and adults, but it is worth noting that there is growing evidence supporting the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions (which typically involve promoting a sense of psychological solitude and meditation) with clinical populations (e.g., those suffering from anxiety, depression, substance-use problems; Salmon and Matarese). Such interventions have also been found to be helpful in the treatment of and recovery from physical illnesses, such as cancer and fibromyalgia (Cash et al.; Tamagawa et al.). However, in recent years, mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques have also become increasingly recommended for the general psychological health of adults (Marchand) as well as children and adolescents (Parker et al.).

## 5. The Critical Role of Context

With most research questions in the field of psychology, things always end up being quite a bit more complicated than we initially imagined. This has certainly been the case when we have tried to ascertain the answer to our basic question: What are the psychological implications of solitude? In this final section, we briefly discuss the critical role of context as a mitigating factor of the costs and benefits of solitude.

### 5.1 Developmental Contexts

There are developmental factors to consider with regard to solitude. To begin with, the estimated percentage of waking time that Americans spend alone appears to increase substantially across the lifespan, from about 17% in childhood, to 30% in adults, to over 50% among the elderly (Larson, "Solitary Side"). There are also

developmental differences in our attitudes toward being alone. For example, although children generally have negative attitudes toward solitude (Coplan et al., "Understanding Solitude"; Galanaki), more positive attitudes steadily emerge over the course of adolescence and into adulthood (Larson, "Emergence of Solitude"; Maes et al.).

Relatedly, the experience of loneliness also appears to vary significantly across the lifespan (Qualter et al.). For example, in a recent study with a nationally representative sample of over 16,000 participants, Maike Luhmann and Louise C. Hawkley found a complex and non-linear pattern of self-reported loneliness from late adolescence through to retirement. After rising from late adolescence to a peak at around age 30 years, there was a down trend in loneliness until about age 40. This was followed by an upward pattern with another peak around age 60 years, and then a steady decline with the lowest rates of loneliness found at age 75 years. However, after this, loneliness rose dramatically until the highest levels were observed among the very oldest in the sample.

To further complicate matters, we argue elsewhere that the very nature of solitary experiences likely change with age. For example, whereas younger children's social experiences are more likely to be influenced by their parents and other external factors (i.e., attending school), adolescents and adults have greater personal control over and increased opportunities for self-selected solitary experiences. Notwithstanding, there may also come a time in the life of older adults where they are significantly (physically) impeded in their ability to actively seek out social contacts.

Perhaps the important developmental question is whether there are differential costs and benefits of solitude at different life stages. For example, spending too much time alone in early childhood may be particularly damaging because it deprives young children from important socialization experiences in the peer group, a critical context for social, emotional, cognitive, and moral development (Rubin, Bukowski, and Bowker). In adolescence, it appears to be particularly critical to spend time alone, in order to facilitate important developmental tasks such as individuation and identity formation (Goossens). Among the elderly, spending too much time alone appears to have a direct link with poorer physical health (Shankar et al.).

The debate as to when in development solitude might carry the greatest costs, or yield the greatest benefits, is yet to be resolved. It remains to be seen how these potential differences in the meaning and experiences of being alone across the lifespan speak to the relation between solitude and well-being.

## 5.2 Cultural Contexts

This volume focuses on cultures of solitude within the specific cultural context of the United States. However, psychology researchers have been increasingly interested in the similarities and differences in attitudes toward and implications of seeking solitude in other cultural contexts across the globe (Chen).

Western countries may value the desire to spend time alone as an autonomous expression of personal choice and independence, and as such, individuals who prefer to spend more time alone are not necessarily violating societal norms (Coplan, Ooi, and Nocita). However, many non-Western cultures place greater emphasis on interdependence and social affiliation. For example, in more collectivistic societies like China, an affinity for spending time alone may conflict with cultural norms regarding group orientation and be viewed as deviant and lead to exclusion and rejection by others (Liu et al., “Unsociability and Shyness”; Liu et al., “Shyness and Unsociability”). In Japan, the extreme seeking of solitude is viewed as a mental illness known as *hikikomori*. This culturally specific phenomenon among Japanese youth involves a prolonged period of self-imposed social isolation (Furlong).

In other cultures, seeking solitude is viewed more positively. For example, in Scandinavian countries such as Finland, the high positive value placed on ‘quietude’ makes the seeking of solitude a normative behavior, considered to be a “natural way of being” (Carbaugh, Berry, and Nurmikari-Berry 203). As well, solitary and unassuming behaviors in African countries such as Nigeria may be more strongly encouraged than sociable behaviors, which might be interpreted as self-promoting and self-asserting (Bowker, Ojo, and Bowker). Thus, the meaning and potential implications of solitary behaviors are very much imbedded within societal and cultural contexts.

## 5.3 Computer-mediated Contexts

As a final consideration, rapid advances in computer-mediated forms of communication have created new contexts for social engagement that have profound implications for those who may seek solitude (Prizant-Passal, Shechner, and Aderka). For example, according to the social enhancement (“Rich Get Richer”) hypothesis (Kraut et al.; Walther), those individuals with already developed high quality off-line social relationships will benefit most from the internet as a social medium. In this regard, sociable individuals who have good social skills and many friends will use computer-mediated communications to further strengthen their existing social networks in the real world. On the other hand, individuals who may seek solitude because of struggles with face-to-face interactions may end up further

worsening their real-world social relationships by retreating even more to virtual communications.

In contrast, the social enhancement (“Poor Get Richer”) hypothesis (Amichai-Hamburger and Hayat; Valkenburg, Schouten, and Peter) argues that individuals who are dissatisfied with their social relationships compensate by increased use of computer-mediated forms of communication. The internet can provide a less anxiety-provoking context for social interactions. Moreover, the anonymous nature of some internet-based communications may help such individuals explore their identity in a safe environment, work through feelings of self-consciousness, and hone social skills. These experiences might then translate into more successful face-to-face social interactions.

Of particular interest for our discussion, however, is how social networking technologies are challenging the very parameters of what it means to be alone. Recall Larson’s assertion that an individual would not be considered to be alone if they were engaged in a phone conversation with someone (“Solitary Side”). This definition clearly bears revisiting in light of new streams of computer-mediated social communications like texting and social networking applications (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter). If the individual in question was engaged in real-time verbal communication with a webcam (e.g., Skype, Facetime), this would clearly fall under Larson’s category of ‘not alone.’ However, in other instances (e.g., ‘liking’ or commenting on a Facebook post) this distinction may be less clear. Indeed, when being connected to social networks is as easy as reaching for your smart phone and is rapidly becoming the norm, it could be argued that we will soon reach a point in our society that we are never truly alone.

## 6. Seeking Solitude vs. Avoiding Social Interactions

The psychological study of solitude indicates that there are complex and varying implications of spending time alone. Moreover, there is growing evidence identifying a wide array of factors that impact upon the links between seeking solitude and well-being. One key factor is the importance of agency (Chua and Koestner). 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 a variety of important benefits. However, as we have seen, some individuals who choose their solitude may still experience being alone in a profoundly negative way. Thus, as a final thought, more than just a function of agency, we would assert that solitude is also more likely to be problematic when it results from a choice to avoid social interaction (e.g., because of social anxiety) – and more likely to confer

psychological benefits when it results from a preference to approach the desired state of spending time alone (e.g., affinity for aloneness).

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