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Don't Listen to the Media: It's Okay to Isolate Yourself

Ella Harris
Scripps College

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Reflective Essay

Reflective Essay

This research paper was given to the class very open-endedly, and essentially we had to come up with our own prompt and then form a thesis based off our research. The class started meeting in the library once a week and that is when librarian, Lydia Bello, helped us get through the early stages of writing. I talked with Lydia extensively as I initially struggled to find a topic that I wanted to research, and then again once settling on a topic as I struggled to formulate a thesis based on all of the information I was reading. Lydia walked me through a word association worksheet that helped me log synonymous phrases for the topic I was studying. This exercise helped me find gaps in my research, leading me to the areas of the subject that were still underdeveloped.

I was trying to write about the importance of spending time in the wilderness, but the way I was going about research was limiting me to resources that solely agreed with my initial statement, and didn't provide reasoning for why this statement was true. The exercise mentioned above helped me find refutable research as well as sources that linked my initial claim to research in different subjects, giving me the information I really needed. By looking at the way research from various fields about my topic came together, I was then able to form a thesis that not only made a claim about the importance of social isolation in the wilderness, but also one that contained psychological reasoning to back up the initial statement. I would have never linked the beneficial cognitive functioning effects to being *alone* in the wilderness had it not been for the word association activity.

Once I knew the correct terminology and the fields I was researching, I took advantage of the Library's access to databases like ProQuest and JSTOR, to start finding the sources I wanted to use. I started to recognize a pattern in the authors of the sources cited for the dissertations and journals I was reading. A majority, if not all, of the sources I cited were found through the works cited section of a previous paper I had read. It became very clear that the research I was looking for had been previously conducted by a very small group of psychologists, and all of their work was connected. With this knowledge, I began searching for books and papers by the authors name instead of by keywords, which helped me find the best fitting sources. For example, Robert Coplan was an author that was frequently cited in the scholarly journals I was reading, and after

typing his name into the library's book database I found *Handbook of Solitude: Psychological Perspectives on Isolation, Social Withdrawal, and Being Alone*, which was the first source I found that linked positive cognitive functioning benefits to social isolation. It was the act of following the works cited in each useful source that ultimately exposed me to the sources that I knew would be helpful right off the bat. Based on the citations listed, I would be able to tell which psychologists would be providing the data, and therefore if that data would be deemed useful to my research.

Another key factor for selecting and evaluating sources was the terminology used in the research. As I mentioned before, the topic I was studying had been researched by a select group of psychologists, and they had founded a lot of the terminology that I used in my paper. Stephan Kaplan coined the term, Attention Restoration Therapy (ART), which was ultimately the underlying proof to validate my thesis, and after finding his work, sources needed to cite him and his theory to become useful in my research. Eventually, with each new source I found and read, my vocabulary for the topic I was researching expanded and I was able to craft very specific criteria that would define the usefulness of the sources I would find.

This research paper has helped me grow into a far better researcher than I could have ever imagined. Researching became a very exciting act for me, and with this project I truly looked forward to finding the psychological connection between being alone in the wilderness. Having read the book, *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer, I was interested in humanities instinct to turn to the wilderness when society becomes too overwhelming, and through developing my researching capabilities I was able to find the scientific evidence linking mental health benefits to being alone in natural environments. Going forward, this research project has helped me to see the intersectionality and relationship between unrelated sources helping me find evidence to prove a claim from a possibly unconventional angle.

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Research Project

“Don’t Listen to the Media:
It’s Okay to Isolate Yourself”

Ella Harris

Professor Adam Novy

Writing 50: Research Paper

November 28, 2016

Don't Listen To The Media: It's Okay To Isolate Yourself

As a society, solitude has consistently been viewed as an experience worth avoiding. The perception of isolating one's self has commonly been associated with the way solitary confinement is employed in the prison system, along with the detrimental effects that this form of seclusion has on a person's mental health. From the petitions that appear on social media platforms, pleading for signatures to release an inmate whose mental health is rapidly decreasing with each day spent in solitary confinement, to television portrayals of isolation within the prison system, solitude is consistently portrayed in a negative light. Sophia Burset, a character in the famous Netflix show, *Orange is the New Black*, is a transgender inmate who is sent to the 'SHU' (solitary confinement) for her own protection. Burset is in the SHU from the end of season three until the end of season four, presumably a year or so in length, and is only released after her wife gets involved following her second suicide attempt. Burset's story, while fictional, is not uncommon among inmates in solitary confinement, which provides support for solitude to be written off as detrimental experience. Undoubtedly, that use of isolation is harmful to one's mental health, although not all forms of solitude enable the same damaging effects. In fact, elective reclusion within natural environments can be

very beneficial to one's sense of self, and cognitive and executive functioning skills, but this form of therapy is not often practiced due to society's negative opinions towards solitude.

It is a natural response to view isolation as only having damaging impacts given the way it is most commonly practiced. Most prison systems will enact solitary confinement for a prisoner who is dangerous to others, is in danger and targeted by other inmates, or in the case of Adam Capay, as a form of punishment. Adam Capay, a First Nationer of Canada, who was originally serving a sentence for a minor offence, was involved in a fight leading to the death of another inmate at Thunder Bay District Jail. Immediately following the death, Capay was put in solitary confinement without trial, and has since spent the last four years alone in complete "segregation," as referred to by the jail, which consists of a tiny room where the lights are never turned off. Ontario's Human Rights Commissioner Renu Mandhane learned about Capay's case just recently while touring the jail and reported, "that Capay's speech seemed delayed, he was having difficulty distinguishing day from night and he showed evidence of self-harm" (Porter). The detrimental effects that Capay has endured due to his solitary confinement are not rare. As stated in *A place apart: The harm of solitary confinement*, a dissertation about the psychological impacts of prolonged solitary confinement in the Canadian prison system, written by Alexandra Campbell, "inmates who spend extended time within an isolation cell suffer a permanent unjust that is not visible to the naked eye: they are unable to resume their previous loving relationships or to start new ones. While leaving the body merely singed, the torture of prolonged isolation scorches some capacity within the mind or soul to empathize with fellow human beings" (Campbell, 2-3). Damages

from the torture of solitary confinement are irreversible, and the detrimental psychological effects are endless, especially when a tremendous amount of inmates in solitary confinement have preexisting mental health problems. Capay's story, along with countless other studies on inmates that have endured solitary confinement, provide context to why society views solitude through an extremely undesirable lens. There is a fear of experiencing social isolation, and it's not only the prison system that inflicts this fear. Society consistently views reclusion with a negative connotation.

In Japan there is a new phenomenon called hikikomori, directly translating to "social withdrawal," in which teens are shutting themselves in their rooms, sometimes for years at a time. This term can be used both to describe the state of withdrawing as well as the people isolating themselves. In Noriko Ohashi's dissertation, *Exploring The Psychic Roots of Hikikomori in Japan*, he looked into five specific case studies of males struggling with hikikomori. This study particularly focused on the psychological impacts before and after one indulges in hikikomori. The findings stated that, "all participants psychologically defended themselves from the demands of Japanese society by withdrawing into their own 'caves.' ... As hikikomori, the participants retreated into the darkness of their unconscious to protect themselves from having to deal with their conscious conflicts, and eventually to heal themselves. ... However, the longer they stayed in their 'caves,' the more difficult it was for them to re-emerge in society, as their image of society as a "scary monster" grew" (Ohashi, 150-151). Hikikomori's use social isolation and solitude as a coping mechanism to escape the stress of the world around them, which is a very common practice. As a whole, humanity has come to retract itself from certain social experiences that are too overwhelming. Although, often times,

without the practice of reintegration therapy and extreme measures taken by the hikikomori's family, the hikikomori will only find it more challenging to emerge from their 'caves' and prolong time spent in isolation.

In the thesis, *What Is It To Be in Hikikomori, An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*, by Maki Fukushima, research "indicated that over 60% of youth who were considered to be in *hikikomori* met the criteria for disorders, which included, but are not limited to, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, and panic disorders (Tokyo Metropolitan Office for Youth Affairs and Public Safety, 2008)" (Fukushima, 20). Fukushima also stated that in a study consisting of interviews from 16 males who had experienced hikikomori, 11 of the men had a previously diagnosed mental health disorder (Fukushima, 14). Furthermore, "the longer they stayed in *hikikomori*, the more fearful they became of being in public places" (Fukushima, 98). The social isolation that was intended to act as a coping mechanism for individuals suffering from mental health disorders was in fact prolonging the problem. Dissimilarly to inmates in solitary confinement, while in isolation, there were no reports of a decrease to the mental health of a hikikomori's, but the solitude would exasperate the social anxiety that inflicted the isolation in the first place. Comparably to prisoners, reintegration would become more and more challenging with each day spent in solitude.

Given all of this research pointing against social isolation as a positive, why is it still humanity's natural instinct to recluse into the wilderness when society becomes too overwhelming?

“I now walk into the wild.” These famous words, written by Chris McCandless on his last post card before retreating to the barren areas of Alaska, are part of one of the most famous stories ever told on the subject of reclusion. *Into the Wild*, by Jon Krakauer, tells the story of McCandless as he abandons his life – his place in society – in order to find his life's purpose. Ironically, although he was seeking solitude in nature on his journey, McCandless is not alone in practicing reclusion. Many others have embodied the practice of reclusion, hermitage, solitude, and social isolation, in search of answers they can't find while immersed in society. While McCandless is not a perfect example, given his unfortunate death due to his under preparedness for the adventure, the journals he kept were recovered and gave great insight to the ultimate success of his solitude. One of McCandless' biggest realizations was an annotation written into the margins of *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak, stating “happiness only real when shared” (Krakauer, 169). It is presumable that if McCandless had the strength to come back from the wild, he would have, having learned the ultimate life lesson of the importance of company; a lesson he could only really value while in solitude. However, due to his passing, McCandless' story is still not a positive portrayal of the benefits of isolation, but that hasn't stopped others from following in his footsteps, and it does provide a stepping-stone to figuring out the most beneficial way of using isolation.

By unpacking Chris McCandless' story, answers to the above question of how to reap the benefits of social isolation will arise. To begin with, an obvious distinction between McCandless' seclusion in the wilderness and the use of solitary confinement in the prison system is the aspect of choice. McCandless' solitude was an elective recluse, and while hikikomoris also make the choice to isolate themselves, nature is a crucial

element to procuring the benefits of isolation. In William Hammit's thesis, *Cognitive Dimensions of Wilderness Solitude*, he proposes the necessity of 'freedom of choice,' and the impact that this freedom can have on one's psychological well-being. "Freedom of choice is listed [by Cantril (1966)] as a major psychological need of humans, and is considered [by Proshansky et al. (1976)] as the major unifying theme under which solitude, privacy, and crowding are only associated elements. One of the overall objectives in seeking the wilderness experience may be to obtain freedom of choice, both in terms of the information people must process and the behavior demanded of them by others" (Hammit, 480-481). As Hammit explains, the wilderness provides an environment that allows one to have considerably more control over their interactions with others. Nature is predictable, and the control one will embody while in the wilderness is very beneficial to one's psychological needs. In addition, the active choice to retreat to the wilderness, again enables this idea of freedom of choice, and restores the control of social encounters into the hands of the person pursuing isolation. Additionally, each person seeking solitude may have varying definitions of what that means, and the wilderness allows all trailblazers the opportunity to utilize isolation to their benefit. Hammit continues to elucidate that "by solitude, wilderness users may mean privacy in terms of withdrawing from social environments in which they have little control over whom and to what extent they must interact and communicate" (Hammit, 481). Whether the person seeking solitude is wanting to do so in complete isolation or in a more populated natural environment, it is the freedom of having control over the interactions they become involved in that makes the solitude a beneficial experience.

While Hammit's dissertation offers great insight as to why freedom of choice is so crucial to a positive solitude experience, it is also very important to understand why struggling people in society so often seek out the wilderness. The dissertation, *The Cognitive Benefits of Interacting With Nature*, starts with the enticing claim: "Imagine a therapy that had no known side effects, was readily available, and could improve your cognitive functioning at zero cost. Such a therapy has been known to philosophers, writers, and laypeople alike: interacting with nature," (Kaplan, Berman and Jonides). Psychologist William James' initial findings, that attention could be divided into two categories: involuntary and voluntary (directed), became the foundation for this thesis. Involuntary attention is when the mind switches focus towards a sudden change in the environment. It is not stimulated by interest or motive; it's effortless. Whereas directed attention, which is found in the prefrontal cortex along with ones cognitive and executive functioning skills, is enabled in order to deliberately focus on specific content (James, Psychology, Briefer Course). Directed attention pulls from the same hormones and energy source as the systems that help one to self regulate, manage stress levels, problem solve, categorize/organize thoughts, emote, and many other executive and cognitive functioning skills. With any mechanism that requires energy to function, in this case, the mechanism being directed attention, at some point the natural resources need to be replenished to keep the mechanism working properly. When involuntary attention is used, directed attention is given time to replenish, although "in this very changed world, directed attention is called upon far more often than it once was and perhaps at times more often than it is capable of responding to" (Kaplan and Berman, 48). As the world changes, innovates and adapts, the urban environment has shifted into an atmosphere that

calls on a persons directed attention for tasks that, from an evolution standpoint, humanity was never equipped to complete. The energy and hormones required to utilize one's directed attention for extended periods of time, is energy and hormones not put towards one's cognitive and executive functioning skills. This continuous depletion of 'fuel' leads to a very unstable life and can be the source of anxiety disorders, extreme stress in social situations, and the inability to perform to the highest capacity interpersonally, analytically and/or emotionally.

The Attention Restoration Theory (ART), founded by Stephan Kaplan, has been used to explain how natural environments can help replenish one's ability to use directed attention and restore executive and cognitive functioning. ART is applicable in three ways: "One could sleep (although the body only seems to put up with a certain amount of sleep). One could meditate, which does appear to be effective, although it takes knowledge and skill—and a bit of patience [(Kabat-Zinn, 1990)]. The third means would be to utilize involuntary attention so as to not utilize directed attention" (Kaplan and Berman, 48). While the first two bids have various limitations, the third one is quite applicable. While urban environments tend to drain one's directed attention rather than restore it, natural environments utilize ones involuntary attention, allowing the directed attention time to rest and replenish. Without this rest, "the resultant mental fatigue can be manifested in, for example, reduced effectiveness in functioning and reduced tolerance for frustration" (Hartig, Mang and Evans, 5). Mental fatigue can also impair ones ability to self-regulate, it increases stress levels, and exacerbates preexisting mental health disorders. It is not by chance that when a person is overwhelmed or stressed out they receive advice along the lines of "why don't you go step outside and get some fresh air?"

Natural environments provide a space for the brain to be restored to maximum functionality, explaining why it is humanity's instinct to retreat to the wilderness when society becomes too overwhelming. Combining Hammit's claim on the importance of freedom of choice with the statements listed above, it becomes clear that elective seclusion in the wilderness allows one to not only forgo the use of directed attention, because they are not in a taxing urban environment, but to also not engage their cognitive and executive functioning skills, due to their isolation and lack of interaction with others. This experience leads to a very successful and therapeutic restoration of one's mental capacity.

Now, not everyone has the time, ability or willingness to endure an adventure like Chris McCandless', but small acts of elective seclusion in natural environments also suffice. In Robert Coplan's book, *Handbook of Solitude: Psychological Perspectives on Isolation, Social Withdrawal, and Being Alone*, he brought together many studies that have explored the restorative properties of spending time in a favorite place. While 'favorite place' is relatively nonspecific, "children who identified a natural favorite place tended to seek cognitive restoration and relaxation as a reason to visit the place slightly more often than children selecting other places such as sport settings, residential setting, community service settings, and commercial or retail settings." Further elaborating, "that favorite places are used to regulate not only the experience of self [(self-identity, self-esteem, Korpela, 2002; Owens & McKinnon, 2009)] but emotions (particularly negative emotions) as well" (Handbook of Solitude, 356). While McCandless took the idea of solitude in a natural favorite place to an extreme, sitting alone on a park bench for fifteen minutes or even walking to the grocery store instead of driving, gives one's directed

attention and prefrontal cortex time to rejuvenate so that their cognitive and executive functioning skills are not compromised. This act reduces one's stress levels and social anxieties, releases negative emotions, increases a better sense of self, and curates a 'clean slate' effect allowing reintegration into an overwhelming social experience more manageable.

It is not unsystematic that humanity attaches a negative connotation to social isolation. Based on the way it is employed in the prison system, there is an obvious reason to fear being alone, although, the positive aspects to solitude also need to be recognized. In a world in which the urban environment is consistently draining one's directed attention and compromising their cognitive and executive functioning skills, the benefits of solitude need to be presented, and it is important to understand that being alone may be stigmatized, but when used appropriately, it isn't detrimental.

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