

Quiet Time: A sense of solitude.

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Abstract

The opportunity for structured experiences of solitude in nature, through the inclusion of Solo, has gained empirical credibility as a significant component of contemporary outdoor and adventure programming. Within this context solitude is most frequently defined in terms of physical isolation and communicative separation.

This paper extends the understanding of solitude as an objective condition and reports on findings from a qualitative study using a grounded theory design that explored the internal and subjective 'sense' of solitude that participants in a challenge based wilderness therapy program associated with the concept of *Quiet Time*

The findings identify *Quiet Time* as a 'sense' of solitude independent of needs for physical isolation or communicative separation. Quiet Time was defined by four co-occurring subjective and internal conditions: a sense of being alone; focused attention; a positive mind frame and a personal time perspective. Typically brief and participant initiated, *Quiet Time* included experiences of "being alone together".

Participants utilised *Quiet Time* to respond to nature, reflect in a ruminative manner, or to relate in authentic and heartfelt conversation. The outcomes of *Quiet Time* influenced positively on participants' immediate experience and processing of the wilderness therapy program.

Among a number of outcomes found to extend beyond the duration for the camp was, for some, the taking up of the habit of Quiet Time as a deliberate self-help and life enhancing strategy.

Introduction

Throughout history and across cultures removing oneself from the demands of daily living in order to spend quiet, solitary time with oneself has been recognized as a strategy for promoting personal growth, spiritual insight and creative thinking (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Gibbens, 1991; Knapp, 2005; Storr, 1997). In pursuit of similar outcomes contemporary outdoor and adventure programming has expressed enthusiasm about the provision of opportunities to 'be alone' in nature. In response to the advice of Outward Bounds funding father, Kurt Hahn, 'Reflective Solo' has become the most common way in which many wilderness adventure programs, including Outward Bound (OB) and National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) explicitly utilise the experience of solitude (Smith, 2005).

Whether the core component of a program, or one of several components, the solo requires participants to spend a prescribed period of time alone in a designated safe location. Participants are discretely supervised and expected to share insights gained with the facilitator and other participants who have had the alone time of solo (Evans, 2005). Typically, the time frame for solo lasts between 24 hours and several days. Programs lasting 6 days or less frequently choose to scale down the solo, perhaps to a 2-hour component during an action day. Maxted (2005) suggests that scaling down the time frame of solo is particularly applicable to programs that extend over days rather than weeks and is a fruitful way of introducing solo to young persons and those who, for other reasons, may find the concept of extended reflective solo threatening. Potter (1992) uses the term 'mini solo' to reference experiences of reflective solo, initiated by the facilitator, lasting one hour or less.

Reflective solo has gained empirical credibility as a significant component of contemporary programming. However, much remains unknown about participants experience and therefore the internal component of the event (Maxted, 2005). The confidence of Jacox, cited in Bevington (2005), that solitude is "good" because it "guarantees reflection" expresses an assumption that solitude of solo is a universally positive experience. Arguably, the claim ignores the potential for a variety of emotional responses to the state of 'being alone.' Within

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this context the solitude of solo is most akin to the definitions of solitude offered by Larson (1990):

Solitude is an objective condition of being alone defined by communicative separation from others (p.157)

and the Encarta World Dictionary (1999):

The state of being alone, separated from other people, whether considered a welcome freedom from disturbance or as an unhappy loneliness.

Conceptions of solitude defined primarily as a state of mind and as brief, positive and self-initiated experience has received little attention despite evidence within the field of psychology to attest to its merit (Nicholls, 2008).

Background to the Study

This paper extends the understanding of solitude as an objective condition and reports on findings from a qualitative study using a grounded theory design that explored the internal and subjective 'sense' of solitude that participants in a challenge based wilderness therapy program associated with the concept of Quiet Time. The inspiration for the study sparked from personal experience as a facilitator of a challenge-based and activity oriented wilderness therapy program. It had been my frequent observation that the potential for personal growth and enhanced wellbeing resided not only in the development of competence and the confronting of internal limits but also within the experience of quietude and silence.

Initially, the research project intended to inquire about the experience of relaxed inactivity and 'stillness' within an action oriented wilderness therapy program. However, in the first of four exploratory interviews, an interviewee responded to the question "what was happening for you in those times when nothing particular was going on?" with a detailed description of two instances of what she described as Quiet Time. It became clear in subsequent interviews that other respondents identified with the use of the phrase. When asked about their experience of Quiet Time, participants talked spontaneously about incidents of reflection and/or solitude, resting, absorption in nature and gentle conversations around the campfire. From that point, the research inquired about Quiet Time rather than 'stillness' and welcomed participants' response to, or spontaneous use of, the phrase as marking an event that fell within the parameters of the investigation. Accordingly, the study was guided by the question: What is the phenomenon of Quiet Time from the participants' point of view and how do they use this phenomenon in a challenge-based wilderness therapy program?

Research Design

Addressing the research question required that the methodological design be sensitive to "the complex and nuanced process of the creation and maintenance of meaning" (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p.2). With this in mind, and because of the dearth of literature in the topic area, grounded theory was selected as an appropriate research methodology. Grounded theory derives its name from the practice of generating theory from research that is "grounded" in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This qualitative approach dictates that data is collected and analysed simultaneously and that analytic codes and categories develop from the data rather than from a preconceived hypothesis (Charmaz, 1995; Creswell, 1998). Thus, grounded theory methodology yields rich description of participants' experiences and a set of concepts and linking propositions that provide theory and explanation about the research phenomena, in this case, the experience of *Quiet Time*.

Sixteen male and two female participants from four Mountain Challenge wilderness therapy programs scheduled between February 2002 and February 2005 participated in the study. All

but one of the participants came to the Mountain Challenge as part of ongoing therapy for drug and/or alcohol addiction. Data were collected in the form of interviews, photographs, journals, field notes and standard program documentation.

A four phase analytic framework was used to progressively refine the concept of *Quiet Time*. The framework derived from a coding paradigm model developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and entailed a combination of inductive and deductive categorization. In simple terms, the task at hand during Phase One was to lay the groundwork for subsequent stages of analysis by getting a sense of the data through the process of open coding and initial major category building. With these foundations in place, the task at Phase Two was to identify the core category or central phenomenon of the investigation, i.e. *Quiet Time*. Phase three required a return to the database in order to reconsider *Quiet Time* in terms of its antecedent conditions, the ways in which participants utilize *Quiet Time*, as well as the context and intervening conditions. Rather than focus on the final stage of the research in which the product of the analytic process, a grounded theory of *Quiet Time*, was portrayed as a visual diagram the intent of this paper is to introduce the concept of *Quiet Time* and to make some comparisons and contrasts between the experiences of *Quiet Time* and mini-solo. In doing so it is anticipated that *Quiet Time* may emerge as a useful term to describe a potentially commonplace occurrence within outdoor adventure programs.

Defining *Quiet Time*

In broad terms the research identified the phenomenon of *Quiet Time* as essentially a ‘sense of solitude’, that is, solitude as a state of being alone but not lonely, a form of privacy rather than isolation, a sense of solitude that was inclusive of experiences of “being alone together”. A key characteristic of the phenomenon of *Quiet Time* was its duration. Typically *Quiet Time* lasted between 10 -15 minutes. Although this characteristic sets it apart from the kind of extended time frames typically associated with reflective solo it finds a parallel in the concept of mini-solo (Potter, 2005).

The second phase of the analytic process entailed asking the question “What is at the heart, what is the essence of participants experience of *Quiet Time*?” In contrast to the objective and external conditions associated with definitions of extended and mini-solo, four co-occurring internal conditions were integral to the defining of *Quiet Time*. They were: a sense of being alone, a positive mind frame, a personal time perspective and focused attention.

A sense of being alone

All accounts of *Quiet Time* were underpinned by a pervasive sense of wilderness solitude. Despite 4WD tracks, mobile phone coverage, the occasional glimpse of townships and an understanding that, at any point, a fit person could access ‘civilization’ within three hours or so of walking, participants reveled in a sense of physical isolation from the “shitty life” (Mitch). The relative isolation, seclusion and solitude of the wilderness environment fostered an inner sense of liberation and expansiveness.

I think, well maybe the isolation we were in would have a lot to do with that because, you haven't got them pressures of what people think of you, all of them were dropped, gone away. (Andy)

(Journeying through a natural landscape) ...sorta, yeah, it took me away from like the shitty life you might as well say, yeah, in such that from where I've just come from, you know what I mean, like yeah it just took all me worries away. (Mitch)

Contrary, to traditional conceptions of solo, the sense of being alone found to be integral to *Quiet Time* was experienced, with two exceptions, within the sight of others and within the

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constant possibility of communication. Incidents of *Quiet Time* typically occurred within two to 30 metres of other participants. Charlie's account of "my bit of space" is typical and suggests that a sense of being alone is more about disengaging from the social context of the group than being out of sight or earshot. It also substantiates Bobilya (2005) who argues that solitude is more about a state of mind than external circumstances. "If people are at peace they can experience solitude in the company of another or in the midst of a crowd" (p. 63).

Positive mind frame

The internal components of *Quiet Time* include a relaxed and positive state of mind. No *Quiet Time* is associated with cooking meals, setting up camp, negotiating a difficult section of the route or any other mentally or physically demanding task. Similarly, there were no accounts of *Quiet Time* within the context of risk or uncertainty. Thus *Quiet Time* occurred after an abseil but not immediately before or during the activity. Participants' frame of mind was found to be the key factor that determined whether time alone, or 'being alone together' was enjoyed and thereby defined as *Quiet Time* or endured and not defined as *Quiet Time*. For example, whilst Andy was able to maintain a 'here and now' focus he enjoyed his Quiet Time focusing on nature. When his thoughts projected forwards to his return to the rehabilitation centre he lost his positive frame of mind and his experience of a 'sense of solitude' was no longer appreciated as a Quiet Time. It is interesting to note, however, that within the context of this research some participants used *Quiet Time* to reflect on significant and distressing personal issues and concerns without losing a positive and empathetic mind frame.

Focused attention

All incidents of *Quiet Time* were associated with low noise levels and a focusing of attention. During *Quiet Time* participants were sufficiently focused on the natural environment, their own thoughts or conversation with others that they were unaware of the passage of time. Andy notes that one and a half hours "just blew away." Staring out at an engaging view Dane felt the "blinkers come on and the hearing" go down. In contrast to the prescribed chronological frameworks of reflective solo, the duration of *Quiet Time* was determined by the attention span of the individual.

Personal time perspective

The solitude of *Quiet Time* was associated with a sense of cognitive freedom and nurturing engagement with self. For some, this was a novel experience.

...It was time, well, for me. I didn't have to think about this place (rehabilitation centre) and I didn't have to think about me addiction and I didn't have to think about things at home, you know what I mean? It was me for a change. (Mitch)

Quiet Time is personal time, "time for me," "my time". Implicit in this perspective is an assumption of privacy that parallels conceptions of solitude discussed by Bobilya (2005), and Pederson (1997).

Unlike Solo or mini solo, that retain their definition whether the experience is enjoyed or not, understanding *Quiet Time* as a predominately internal state entails recognition that unlimited factors have the potential to inhibit or encourage *Quiet Time*. Simply put, any factor that has the capacity to influence any of the four previously identified integral components of *Quiet Time* may be regarded as an intervening variable that has the capacity to inhibit or encourage *Quiet Time*. Table 1 presents an overview of some of the contextual conditions found most likely to facilitate or constrain the incidence and nature of *Quiet Time*.

Initiating *Quiet Time*

In contrast to the facilitator initiated and structured experience of solo and mini solo, *Quiet Time* was predominately self-initiated. Within a perceived context of 'no rush' both facilitators and participants initiated *Quiet Time*. Facilitators initiated *Quiet Time* overtly via an invitation to "take ten minutes or so by yourself, to just soak up the surroundings" or covertly through the modeling of a 'no rush' approach to the wilderness adventure. Participants initiated *Quiet Time* by disengaging from the social context of the group or by engaging at a level of heartfelt exchange.

Utilising *Quiet Time*

Despite a broad range of virtues attributed to the experience of solitude (Koch, 1994), outdoor adventure theory and practice predominately associate solitude with an opportunity for reflection (McKenzie, 2003). In this study participants brought meaning to the relative solitude of *Quiet Time* in three broad ways: by *Responding* to nature, *Reflecting* on experience and *Relating* to others. *Responding* and *Reflecting* find their parallel in the expectations for mini-solo articulated by Potter (1992) as:

An opportunity to slow down and simply notice, perhaps for the first time, the wonders of nature. ...to reflect upon the trip, the environment, oneself and others.
(p. 96)

Reflecting

In line with conventional expectations participants did use the solitude of *Quiet Time* to reflect on their Mountain Challenge experience. As Luckner and Nadler (1997) might expect, during *Quiet Time* spent *Reflecting* participants' monitor their progress, and reflect on lessons learned in the field. However, the findings suggest that the scope of participants' reflections extend beyond their wilderness therapy program to include significant and current life issues as well broader existential issues. This finding gives some credence to Woodcock (2006) and his argument that reflection structured by a facilitator may distract a participant from the issues "by their inner compass, carry greater personal significance than do the topics that intrigue the leader" (p. 4).

The ruminative nature of participant reflections aligns with the suggestion by McKenzie (2003) that traditional understandings of reflection as a predominately cognitive and linear process are incomplete. Based on her study investigating the process of change within *Outward Bound*, McKenzie proposes that the Walsh and Golins (1976) model of change, a foundation stone of adventure and wilderness programming, be adapted to account for her finding that reflection is not always cognitive and linear: "it may also be non-cognitive in character and include embodied interactions such as intuitive insights and a sense of "coming to know" (p. 20).

Contrary to the prevailing view expressed by Hammond (2005) and others that journaling provides a constructive way to deepen reflective solitude, participants in this study were, in general, reluctant to take up the offer of journals and pens to create a reflective record of their experience. In his study of the solo experiences of adolescents Maxted (2005) similarly found that few of the students interviewed completed the written reflection tasks assigned to them.

Responding

That 23 of the 50 experiences of *Quiet Time* identified in this study were spent predominately focussing on, and responding to nature supports the observations observations of Haluza-Delay (2001) who noted that participants were most aware of nature during brief 'planned sits.'

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Time spent *Responding* to nature was characterised by a moment by moment awareness of the external landscape as a place of tranquility and beauty. Typically the experience was essentially non-verbal, embodied, sensuous emotionally charged and difficult to articulate. In her integration of some of the principles of Buddhist psychotherapy with some of the theoretical and practical aspects of Adventure Therapy, Trace (2004) emphasises the significance of the 'felt sense' and introduces the concept that we remember in the body as well as the mind.

When we remember a trip, we remember the felt-sense of the trip, as well as the physical part of the journey itself. We remember stories about ourselves on that trip. The stories contain and evoke emotional themes. Just as trauma can 'leave an individual with a profoundly reorganised sense of self' [Grigsby & Stevens 2000, p. 336] so too, strong positive emotional experiences alter sense of self.' (p.113)

In this study *Quiet Time* spent in ruminative reflection and/or simply focussing on nature impacted positively on participants' understanding of themselves and on their capacity to understand some of their unresolved and significant domestic concerns. Understanding *Quiet Time* as a route to alternate and valid ways of knowing finds support in recent research findings in the cognitive sciences.

We know that the brain is made to linger as well as rush, and that slow knowing sometimes leads to better answers. We know that knowledge makes itself known through sensations, images, feelings, inklings as well as through clear conscious thoughts. To be able to meet the uncertain challenges of the contemporary world, we need to heed the message of this research, and to expand our repertoire of ways of learning and knowing to reclaim the full gamut of cognitive possibilities (Claxton, 1997, p. 201).

Table 1. Some Factors That Facilitate or Constrain *Quiet Time*

Category	Sub-categories	Examples
Individual Participant Needs, Strengths and Limitations	Anxiety level Personal Preference Literacy	...that was a buggered stop not a <i>Quiet Time</i> stop, but everyone did go quiet (Charlie). I felt I didn't want to socialise as much as I could, I felt that time there was just to be peaceful and happy with myself (Mick).
Environmental Factors	Scenic beauty Physical challenge Noise levels Weather	...all this space and be able to see so much sky...the more your eye has to take in the more I'm able to relax myself into having alone time (Col) It was just dead silent, and you had nothing else to concentrate on except the view and how you actually felt (Andy)
Leadership Issues	Styles Preferences Relationships	...we had a bit too much time to think, without a bit of guidance (Ben) ...it would have been a whole different trip if you had been the controlling factors of it, I don't think we would have been as open as what we were...it definitely would have shut me up (Gus)
Levels of Group Development	Surviving Thriving Testing the Waters Dropping the Wall	...the time to contemplate, reflect, just being me without being an addict, the sense of belonging and trust which went right through everything (Ben). When the wall dropped you just noticed things more and you take everything in, the surroundings the atmosphere with people, the noises, the views and things like that (Andy).

Relating

Andy was the first interviewee to articulate the potential for intimate conversational exchange to be regarded as *Quiet Time*. He said:

The *Quiet Times* are very unique... some of them are with a friend when you're just having a chat and you get onto a certain topic when you can both help each other out and still that is a *Quiet Time* between two people or three people, it doesn't really matter because just by talking to someone they could be saying something you might really struggle with, and, talking about it with someone you get more peace of mind out of it, get more understanding, and it gives you more, you're not just talking about shit, you're talking about things that are heartfelt and things you've done in the past that's not happening now.

That participants' definitions of *Quiet Time* might include intimate verbal exchange was an unexpected finding although, in the field of psychology, Hammit (1982) identifies the drive for intimacy and privacy with ones companions as a highly valued dimension of wilderness experience.

Quiet Time spent in heartfelt conversation was suggestive of the kind of spontaneous and informal peer discussion identified by Burrige (2004) and Russell (2000) as having significant impact on the processing of experience but is, as yet, unaccounted for in the literature. *Quiet Time* conversations were typically spontaneous, ruminative and characterised by the sparking of ideas thoughts and feelings of one group member to another. These findings reinforce the notion that wilderness adventure experiences, including *Quiet Time* spent *Relating* in heartfelt and honest conversation yields, amongst other gains, social, emotional and psychological benefits that may extend beyond the life of a program (Ewert, 1989). According to Peck (1987):

We cannot really be ourselves until we are able to share freely the things we most have in common: our weaknesses, our incompetence, our imperfection, our inadequacy...this is the kind of individualism that makes real community possible.
(p. 58)

Consequences

A number of identifiable outcomes arose as a result of *Quiet Time* spent reflecting, responding to nature or relating to others. Whilst some of these outcomes were discernable at the time of *Quiet Time*, others reverberated in participants' lives on return to the recovery centre. Immediate outcomes included a sense of euphoria or 'natural high, a sense of self-worth, insight, relaxation, peace, 'a mind rest', anxiety reduction, mental clarity and the development of empathy. For some participants the benefits of *Quiet Time* extended beyond the length of the Mountain Challenge program. For example, Dean regarded a new found confidence in his ability to focus his attention as a useful "tool against the dark forces." From his experience of reflective Quiet Time Gus took strength from learning, 'not how to' express his emotions but that "it's alright to." A number of participants developed the habit of Quiet Time as a deliberate self-help and life enhancing strategy. For all, the 'mateship' that grew, at least in part, from shared Quiet Time spent relating with honesty and empathy provided an ongoing source of support.

Many of the emotions and feelings associated with the experience of *Quiet Time* parallel those identified by Fredrickson and Anderson (1999) and Stringer and McAvoy (1992) as indicative of spiritual experience. Although neither study focused directly on the experience and impact of solitude in their exploration of the spiritual dimensions of wilderness experience, it is interesting to note that the findings in both studies identified "time off,"

“time alone or “time to go off and be by myself” as particularly conducive to spiritual inspiration.

Understanding the solitude of *Quiet Time* as conducive to spiritual experience is not necessarily surprising. Solitude and spiritual experience are strongly linked within the literature (Gibbens, 1991; Heintzman, 2003; Storr, 1997). It is, however, of note that such positive outcomes occur within the relatively short time frame of *Quiet Time*.

Does *Quiet Time* characterised by attributes, feelings and emotions, associated with spiritual experience have value beyond the immediacy of the experience? Considered against the often times chaotic and destructive backdrop of many wilderness therapy participants’ lives, it is conceivable that experiences of peace, belonging and other such emotions and feeling described here as spiritual, carry an especial significance.

Conclusion

A number of implications for wilderness therapy programming and practice flow from the findings in this study. Foremost is the appreciation that the therapeutic potential of challenge-based wilderness therapy programs can be enhanced by promoting opportunities for facilitators and participants to initiate *Quiet Time* through the adoption of an unhurried and process oriented approach to the wilderness adventure.

Can the findings of this single qualitative study of *Quiet Time* within the specific context of a wilderness therapy program be generalised to other outdoor adventure programs that utilise the power of nature and adventure in pursuit of personal growth and other well being outcomes? In the quantitative sense of the word, the answer is probably “No.” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The research design dictated a concern with ‘explanatory power’ (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p. 267) rather than large-scale generalizability. In effect, the approach said, “This is the situation I studied, and these are the things I found going on there. Look at it in detail. How does it compare with situations you know? Are there processes here which compare with things that you’ve observed? Are your processes a bit different? What is it in our two situations that could account for these differences?” (Rampton, Roberts, Leung, & Harris, 2002, p. 374). maintain that grounded theory design is able “ That this study might be judged in such practical turns is pleasing.

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