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Advice

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Screening Out the Introverts

By William Pannapacker

Some years ago I joined my students in taking the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a test to determine personality type. It was an assignment in a course I was teaching on vocational exploration.

Assuming there would be an average distribution of results among the 20 students, I planned a series of small-group assignments in which they would discuss their own results for each of the test's personality dichotomies (e.g., thinking versus feeling). But a problem turned up immediately: Not one student had received an "I" for introversion. Everyone, it seemed, was an extrovert (Myers-Briggs spells it with an "a," like "extra"). Everyone but me.

Extroverts—if you accept such categories—are oriented outward, toward other people and toward action over reflection. They draw energy from social interaction, and they tend to be outspoken and gregarious. Introverts, on the other hand, are oriented toward the inner life of thought; they tend to be reserved and cautious. They find social interactions draining, and they need solitude to recharge. It's not that introverts are antisocial so much as that they appreciate fewer, more intimate friendships. They don't like small talk but appreciate deeper discussions.

I knew my students well enough to suspect that I was not the only one with that tendency. A third of them barely spoke in class unless called upon. A few hardly spoke to anyone. Perhaps the introverted choices on the test were too stigmatizing to consider (e.g., "Would you rather go to a party or stay home reading a book?"). The students had used the test to confirm that they had

the right, "healthy" qualities.

Given that introversion is frowned upon almost everywhere in U.S. culture, the test might as well have asked, "Would you prefer to be cool, popular, and successful or weird, isolated, and a failure?" In the discussion that followed, a few students observed—with general agreement—that introversion was a kind of mental illness (and, one student noted, a sign of spiritual brokenness). "We are made to be social with each other" was a refrain in the conversation.

A few sympathetic students tried to persuade me that my introvert result was a mistake. How could I stand in front of that room, leading that very conversation, smiling at them, without being an extrovert? The answer: careful planning, acting, and rationing my public appearances. Also, my introversion fades when I become comfortable with unfamiliar people (the first weeks of classes are a strain).

We soon moved on to other personality dichotomies that were more evenly distributed. When the class was over, many of the students continued talking in an animated way about their results. Several left, silently, by themselves. The conversation left me exhausted; I went to my office and closed the door for an hour as I prepared for my next performance.

Those experiences came back to me while reading Susan Cain's new book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. The book is a hybrid work of cultural history, advocacy, personal narrative, and persuasive self-help. It's a wider-ranging companion to such recent works as *The Introvert Advantage: How to Thrive in an Extrovert World* by Marti Olsen Laney; *Living Fully With Shyness and Social Anxiety* by Erika B. Hilliard; and *The Introverted Leader: Building on Your Quiet Strength* by Jennifer B. Kahnweiler. Cain does not offer a significant critique of the pharmaceutical industry, which has established rapturous

sociability as a norm to which everyone should aspire. For that topic, one should read *Shyness: How Normal Behavior Became a Sickness* by Christopher Lane.

Most notably, Cain argues for the value of introverts in a culture that has a long history of privileging extroversion—something, she argues, that has only grown more powerful, and perhaps costly, in recent decades. It's a trend that affects business, religion, education, parenting, and just about everyone's sense of self-worth in the United States.

According to Cain, the 19th century valued personal character based on seriousness, discipline, and honor, but the 20th century emphasized personality: selling oneself and being a "mighty likeable fellow." Dale Carnegie's bestseller, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1937), is a major signal of that shift for Cain. Perhaps it would have made for an excessively long cultural history, but one can trace those tendencies in the United States back through the writings of Horatio Alger, P.T. Barnum, Stephen Burroughs, and even to that epitome of the Protestant work ethic: Benjamin Franklin, author of the "The Way to Wealth," who gave at least as much attention to the appearance of being hardworking as he did to working hard.

Meanwhile, one can easily find notable celebrations of reticence and reflection in writers such as Thoreau and Dickinson, just as there are many 20th-century critiques of the extrovert ideal, such as *Babbitt* (1922) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949).

The Power of Positive Thinking (1952) has coexisted in American culture with the pathos of *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) for decades, but Cain makes a compelling case that, these days, Norman Vincent Peale has J.D. Salinger in a headlock, and he's not letting go anytime soon.

We now live under a kind of extrovert tyranny, Cain writes, and

that has led to a culture of shallow thinking, compulsory optimism, and escalating risk-taking in pursuit of success, narrowly defined. In other words, extroverts—amplifying each other's groundless enthusiasms—could be responsible for the economic crisis because they do not listen to introverts, even when there are some around (and they are not trying to pass as extroverts).

If that's stretching matters, it seems harder to deny that the routine exclusion and silencing of talented, quiet people has costs just like other forms of arbitrary discrimination. And, Cain argues, the extrovert idea is discriminatory on the basis of ethnicity, particularly against those who share the Asian cultural ideal of speaking less and thinking more.

For many introverts, being forced to conform to a culture of extroversion has costs for their health, personal lives, and their sense of integrity and authenticity. While the ranks of tragic, unknown introverts are no doubt legion, throughout *Quiet*, Cain showcases the heroic use of "quiet power" by sketching the lives and accomplishments of Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosa Parks, Al Gore, and Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple, among others.

Apart from the book's personal relevance, I could not help thinking of *Quiet* in terms of academic culture, especially in relation to the challenges faced by graduate students who are not extroverts.

Many people are drawn to academic life because they expect it will provide a refuge from the social demands of other careers: They believe one can be valued as a studious introvert, as many undergraduates are. But academe is a profession of opposites. Long periods of social isolation—research and writing—are punctuated by brief periods of intense social engagement: job interviews, teaching, conferences, and meetings. One reason that completion rates for graduate programs are so low—and

unhappiness levels so high—is, I suspect, because students are not selected for the full range of aptitudes they will need to be successful in graduate school. And there are few if any supports in place for those students who struggle with the extremes of introversion and extroversion that academe demands.

Introverts, whom Cain describes as spending their youth reading and cultivating the inner life, and typically succeeding at school, may find themselves suddenly underperforming as graduate students. Cain writes about seminars at the Harvard Business School in which students are expected to leap into discussions, unprompted, and find ways to hold the spotlight, regardless of whether they have anything to add to the conversation.

In my experience, that approach is practiced in graduate seminars across the disciplines. It can aggravate tendencies toward introversion and shyness among students who formerly showed their capabilities through tests and papers, and by raising their hands to answer questions in class. Silent graduate students are not necessarily disengaged; they are hyperaware that the professor and the other students are judging them. Such seminars are often so intimidating, and potentially humiliating, that I suspect many introverts finally lapse into silence, if not complete disengagement and withdrawal, within the first or second year of graduate school.

But graduate seminars are just the beginning. There are countless social events and networking opportunities that introverts find exhausting. Many of those events are characterized by elaborate social rules governing behavior and the appropriate topics of conversation. Everywhere extroverts are working the room, making small talk, and laughing in clusters while the introverts are smiling weakly and struggling just to find one person with whom they can speak about their research. Usually, the introverts leave early, if they find the energy to come at all. Over time, introverted students face a huge relative disadvantage in the reach of their professional networks.

Meanwhile, most graduate students are teaching for the first time, and the introverts are constantly worried about how their reticence will damage their credibility in the classroom: Will my hands tremble, will my voice quaver, will I be able to smile naturally? Will they challenge my authority?

All of those concerns can weigh heavier than the mastery of the course content for graduate students who are not naturally extroverted. Similar concerns affect their delivery of conference papers, oral examinations, and other public defenses of their work. Inevitably, there are missteps and criticisms, and introverts tend to dwell on those moments (and retain mental catalogs of them), rather than moving forward with growing confidence based on their successes.

Then comes the struggle to secure an academic position. Publication is important, of course, but so is the ability to connect with strangers—sometimes in large numbers—under extreme stress (for example, the awareness during an interview that it may be the only one you ever get).

When there are so many job candidates with excellent written credentials, "fit" and personality take on a magnified importance. One could hardly devise a more brutal process for disadvantaging introverts than the two-day, on-campus interview—Involving multiple high-stakes meetings with important strangers, a public lecture, and a teaching demonstration, all in an unfamiliar location with little or no time to recharge between events.

Should academe be concerned that it loses many of its introverted graduate students? Do they not have something to contribute? Does selecting for extroverts favor a cult of charismatic leadership: a star system? Is Cain correct in her view that a profession that sorts out introverts selects for unwarranted enthusiasms for, say, the latest theories, technologies, and institutional practices without considering the consequences? Does it foster a winner-

take-all system in which compassion and sensitivity have no place?

I wonder how those who tend toward introversion—perhaps the majority of people who aspire to academic careers—have coped with those demands. And what can institutions do to serve their needs more effectively?

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138 comments

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happyprof · 2 years ago

I don't subscribe to the introvert-extrovert dichotomy- it's just pop psychology. I do think that these stereotypical categories are part of a larger, non-linear spectrum, though, and the most typical personality type in this profession seems to be a person who is an extrovert (of sorts) in situations in which they know more than the audience about the topic, but an introvert (of sorts) among equals and superiors. In other words, great in a classroom, awkward in social interactions with peers, and suspicious of administrators and others in authority.

It's not a pathology to be repaired, just a natural fit for the demands of the job. It's certainly my personality type- I love the classroom, but prefer small groups for socializing, preferably non-academics. I enjoy my colleagues, but I'm not a gossip person or a "gift of gab" person and generally avoid those people.

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englishwlu → happyprof · 2 years ago

happyprof, the introversion/extroversion distinction is not just pop psychology. Jerome Kagan, Daniel and Amy Starch Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, has produced a huge body of work on the topic with his collaborators. Here's his self description: "Professor Kagan's research, on the cognitive and emotional development of a child during the first decade of life, focuses on the origins of temperament. He has tracked the development of inhibited and uninhibited children from infancy to adolescence. Kagan's research indicates that shyness and other temperamental differences in adults and children have both environmental and genetic influences. A shy adult is more likely to have been high-reactive (fearful) in infancy and childhood than their bold and sociable counterparts, who were most likely low-reactive." Perhaps most relevant to Pannapacker's column is Kagan's discovery, based on longitudinal studies, that very few shy individuals grow up to be bold and vice versa. That tells us