Gentle Power: The Positive Psychology of Introversion

A review of

Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking
by Susan Cain

Reviewed by
Robert Furey

Extraverts probably have an easier time writing opening lines. They are well practiced at connecting, stimulating, even provoking. When your English teachers told you that your first sentence should “reach out and grab the reader,” they might as well have said, “Write like an extravert.”

An introvert, on the other hand, would more likely begin with an invitation. In his or her unique way, an introvert might offer: “I’ve found something worth considering.” Although this doesn’t have the punch required to excel in most versions of English 101, to some, the invitation has more power than the grab.

Susan Cain’s book Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking invites readers to consider the countercultural notion that introversion can be a gift. The introvert’s tendency to find energy in solitude and preferring intimacy to popularity may not
match the so-called extravert ideal, yet it produces invaluable contributions to committees, communities, and cultures.

The prevalence of introversion is not quite clear. Cain estimates that one third to one half of Americans are introverts (p. 3). Introverts, however, typically believe they are a much smaller minority. Indeed, part of the introvert experience involves watching extraverts control boardrooms, staff meetings, classrooms, and playgrounds. To an introvert, extraverts seem to be everywhere.

Aron (1996) concluded that the majority of Americans “quite wrongly associate introversion with poor mental health” (p. 15). Similarly, Laney (2002) found that both introverts and extraverts choose extraverts as their ideal self and their ideal leader. This supports Cain’s contention that the White House tends to be occupied by extraverts; contemporary politics seems to require an extraverted nature. It makes one wonder if Abraham Lincoln would be a serious presidential contender today.

Introverts can, Cain insists, be effective leaders. They are capable of feeling a passion that pulls them beyond the quiet and into the loud. If something matters to them, introverts can teach, lead, fight, direct, debate, and rebel. Consequently, an introvert can lead a country through a civil war or build a company such as Microsoft. They will, however, need to recognize their need to return to the quiet.

If there is anything approaching a glaring weakness to this book, it may be the author’s reluctance to explore the shadow side of this personality type. A review of the relevant research indicates that introverts may be more distractible (Dobbs, Furnham, & McClelland, 2011) and that extraverts tend to have better working-memory skills (Lieberman, 2000). Introversion may be a factor in the development of eating disorders among young women (Miller, Schmidt, Vaillancourt, McDougall, & Laliberté, 2006), and young men who demonstrate tendencies toward social introversion may be more likely to commit suicide (Yen & Siegler, 2003). Although introversion may have its blessings, it also seems to have a dark side.

Quiet, however, is a book about the strengths of the introvert. Biased as it may be in this regard, such a book is long overdue. Decades ago, Jung (1971) pointed to the “feeling of inferiority that is characteristic of the introvert” (p. 93). Educating the public to the best of introversion should go a long way toward easing this sense of inadequacy.

Praising the introvert, however, presents its own dangers. As an introvert, I found myself thinking: “This feels good. Now leave me alone and let me be an introvert. Stop forcing me to grab people with punched-up opening lines.” Although Cain recognizes the need to “stretch” ourselves beyond our comfort zones, the affirmation of introversion can make it seem quite comfortable. A celebration of introversion may not, by itself, produce the healthy inner “balance” between introversion and extraversion that Jung had in mind. Developing one’s extraverted side may require some occasional mimicry. Certain researchers, including Zelenski, Santoro, and Whelan (2012), in fact, have found that dispositional introverts may benefit from acting extroverted from time to time.
Cain’s approach to reaching this balance, however, is reminiscent of Carl Rogers’s (1961) paradox of change: “When I accept myself as I am, I change” (p. 17). Rogers insisted that honest self-acceptance leads to growth rather than complacency. The awareness, understanding, and acceptance of your inclination may—if Rogers is to be believed—lead you to develop the other side of yourself.

*Quiet* was written by an introvert for introverts to help them understand who they are and what they have to offer. Cain hopes to help introverts “honor their own styles instead of allowing themselves to be swept up by prevailing norms” (p. 173). There is, however, a secondary audience. This book can educate extraverts who struggle to comprehend those who are exhausted by parties, hate small talk, and need more time to decide. *Quiet* can help extraverts understand their introverted spouses. It will assist extraverted teachers and bosses in understanding their introverted students and employees. Clinicians will find this to be a useful tool to educate their clients on the nature of introversion.

In a world of many books, *Quiet* is an important contribution. Interestingly, many introverts are bibliophiles. I doubt the book industry could survive without introverts. Yet there is precious little written that effectively helps introverts understand themselves and even less to help inform extroverts on the nature of introversion. Of what is available, *Quiet* may be the best.

**References**


