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Abstract

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Keywords

Personality traits, Extraversion introversion, International education, International assessment, Parents, Teachers

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank all the Nepalese living in Vancouver, Canada, who participated in the book club meeting organised on September 19, 2015. I have used some of the ideas discussed in the meeting.

BOOK REVIEW: Cain, S. (2012). *Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers. 333 pages. ISBN: 9780307352149.

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In *Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking*, Susan Cain, a graduate of Princeton University and Harvard Law School, argues that while “one out of every two or three people” (p. 4) on earth are introverts the Western culture undervalues the characteristics and capabilities of these people. In the first chapter of the book, Cain explores some fundamental characteristics of introverts (see pp. 10-12) which include: having fewer close friends, listening more than speaking, thinking before speaking, writing better than conversing, working slowly and deliberately, and having the power to focus on a specific task. One might put shyness and introversion in the same category when differentiating introverts from extroverts. But Cain claims that introverts are not necessarily shy: “shyness is the fear of social disapproval or humiliation...which is inherently painful,” but introversion is not (p. 12).

Throughout the book, Cain highlights the power and beauty of introversion by providing some empirical evidence that has been neglected in the world dominated by the Western civilisation, which tends to focus on one’s personality rather than characteristics. Even educational institutions such as schools and universities are designed to fit with the personality of extroverts. For example, presenting the case of Harvard Business School, in Chapter 2, Cain claims that so-called Ivy League universities admit only those who have already established themselves as outspoken leaders and those who are more likely to become risk-taking business leaders. Curriculum of academic institutions are designed to create such leaders, and classroom activities promote those outspoken students who tend to focus on performance rather than the development of their inner competence.

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Cain claims that major scientists who made significant discoveries such as Newton and Einstein were introverts. She further argues that influential figures like Eleanor Roosevelt, Al Gore, Warrant Buffet, Mahatma Gandhi, and Rosa Parks achieved their successes “because of their introversion” (p. 6). It appears as a paradox: on the one hand, she claims that Western civilisation promoted throughout its history extroversion as an ideal goal that everyone must achieve. On the other hand, she claims that major scientists, business tycoons, and world leaders who made significant influences on world politics and the economy are introverts. An interesting point to note here is that Cain puts herself in the camp of introverts. How has it been possible for those introverts to break the boundary maintained by the extroverts and make such breakthroughs in science, commerce and politics?

The paradox is solved to a great extent in the succeeding chapters of the book. One of the most important insights readers could get from *Quiet* is the leadership role of introverts for the success of an institution. She explores how an introverted leadership could be a milestone for the success of any institution; no matter whether the institution focuses on science such as National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), commerce such as Berkshire Hathaway, or political institutions of any nation. Cain argues that an introverted leader is far better than an extroverted one because the former has the power and passion to listen to others who work under his/her leadership. A quote from the book explains this: “If we assume that quiet and loud people have roughly the same number of good (and bad) ideas, then we should worry if the louder and more forceful people always carry the way. This would mean that an awful lot of bad ideas prevail while good ones get squashed” (p. 51).

Cain’s conceptualisation of an introverted leader relates with the field of international and comparative education. After reading *Quiet*, scholars involved in the field of comparative education might wonder whether powerful supranational organizations—such as the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the European Union, and United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)—that are actively involved in the educational development of the economically poor countries of the global South have failed to listen and engage with local—often introverted—leaders. It appears, for example, that World Bank’s consultants, mostly economists trained in technical skills and statistical modelling (Resnik, 2006) might have squashed ideas and experiences of the local people who have better potential of designing contextually appropriate educational projects.

In Chapter 7—with an interesting heading *Why did Wall Street Crash and Warren Buffet Prosper?*—Cain explores some of the fundamental causes of the global economic crisis that started in 2008. She indicates that risk taking extroverted economists who hold key positions in global financial institutions such as banks are responsible for the economic crisis. She argues that “too much power was concentrated in the hands of aggressive risk takers” whereas people who were “congenitally more cautious and introverted and statistical in their thinking” were discredited and pushed aside (p. 164). An important question in this regard is: Does Cain mean that extroverts play negative roles in the success of an institution? She does not lead her readers to such an extreme conclusion. She suggests that success of an institution depends on a delicate balance of both

extroverts and introverts where the latter group is not dominated by the former: “a healthy mix of both” (p. 93). Introverted leaders are better than their extroverted counterparts in “their inclination to listen to others [literally she means extroverts] and lack of interest in dominating social situations” (p. 57). Cain further claims that introverts are more likely to hear and implement suggestions. “Having benefitted from the talents of their followers, they [introverted leaders] are then likely to motivate them to be even more proactive” (p. 57).

In Chapter 8 Cain explores whether culture is a determining factor of one’s personality. Presenting some cases of Asian students, those who study in international universities such as University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and Harvard, Cain explores the difficulties faced by international students while participating in some Western educational institutions. She argues that “in many East Asian classrooms, the traditional curriculum emphasizes listening, writing, reading and memorization” (p. 184). She further argues that—unlike in most North American schools where students are encouraged to participate in oral group discussion—in the schools of Asian countries “talking simply is not a focus, and is even discouraged” (p.184). Cain’s argument raises serious questions on whether “Asian students need to adapt to Western educational norms” or they should “be forced to speak up and conform to the Western mode” (pp. 185-186).

In Chapter 10 Cain elaborates the issue of whether introverted and extroverted people can work together, for example, in an academic environment. Does it become really “hard for introverts and extroverts to understand each other’s ways of resolving differences” (p. 229)? With some empirical research evidence, Cain argues that “introverts like people they meet in friendly contexts” whereas extroverts prefer those they compete with. One implication of this argument in the field of teaching and learning is an urge for promoting introverted ideals—such as listening more than speaking, deep thinking rather than making forceful guesses, and focusing on specific tasks rather than being involved in many at the same time—in educational venues such as schools and universities. For Cain, both extroverts and introverts can create a win-win situation if the former understands the power and passion of their introverted counterparts.

If creating a group of both introverts and extroverts is to be a focus, then one might ask: is *group work* a key to success? Cain argues that “if personal space is vital to creativity, so is freedom from ‘peer pressure’” (p. 86). With some empirical evidence, Cain argues that “performance gets worse as group size increases: groups of nine generate fewer and poorer ideas compared to groups of six, which do worse than groups of four” (p. 88). However, there is an exception: online brainstorming. Academic scholars “who work together electronically, from different physical locations tend to produce research that is more influential than those either working alone or collaborating face-to-face” (p. 89). In the age of technology enhanced education and learning Cain’s argument makes sense; but does it apply to family matters, for example, to having a successful family and providing a better environment for children? No, this notion of online collaboration should not supplant the inevitability for living together in a family. Another insight that readers will get from *Quiet* is not to take anything for granted or generalise because there could be exceptions. In this regard, the book suggests that “every pair bond between mother and father, between parent and child, is an act of creative collaboration” (p. 92).

Jerome Kagan (1994), a famous developmental psychologist that Cain frequently cites in *Quiet*, argued that certain behaviors in infancy are predictive of certain other behavior patterns in adolescence. Kagan and his team studied 500 four-month-old infants until they reached 11 years. Opposite of what many people would assume, the study showed that about 20% of the children under investigation who had hyper-reactive behaviors during their infancy “developed serious, careful personalities” similar to that of introverts in their adolescence. The other 40% that were quiet and placid—the low-reactive ones—developed the characteristics corresponding to extroverts. One lesson that we could draw from this study is that “we are born with pre-packaged temperaments that powerfully shape our adult personalities” (p. 105). But having drawn this lesson, we should not bypass the unsettled debate on nature versus nurture, that is, whether our genes or the environment around us determines our future. The book does not aim to solve the nature vs. nurture puzzle. Cain reveals that “one hundred percent of my introversion might come from genes, or none at all—or more likely some unfathomable combination of genes and experience” (p. 109).

Another insight that readers get from *Quiet* is the notion of whether competitiveness should guide our educational practices. In the context of increasing financial globalization, educational policies and practices in the global South are very much shaped by neoliberal orthodoxies such as competitiveness, performance based indicators, and privatization. Competition and performance based rewards and funding modalities in education are taken as global policy norms by multilateral organizations such as the World Bank and the OECD. Individual students, academic institutions and even whole nations are seen as competitors whose failure to achieve better results in international assessments—such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)—is understood as a failure of individual students, their academic institutions and their nations. Economically poor countries of the South are often asked to participate in those assessments and follow the benchmarking systems developed by the OECD and the World Bank. As noted by Wiseman and Baker (2005), “schools and their outcomes are increasingly quantified, measured, and compared on a global scale. These international comparisons of educational systems are then being fed back into individual nations’ policymaking processes around the world” (p. 1).

Cain’s arguments, in this respect, indicate that the international assessment regime might help to make evidence based decisions for experts working at international policy spaces, but it does not promote wisdom, global citizenship, and critical thinking. Rather, this regime tends “to lionize” (p. 169) best performers, those who are able to win this “global war for talent” (Brown & Tannock, 2009), hence it neglects those who fail to be “best” because of various reasons, such as inequality and marginalization perpetuated for decades across and within nations. In Cain’s conceptualisation the advocates of the international learning assessment regime are “too reward sensitive” (p. 158) and often “have greater economic, political, and hedonistic ambitions” (p. 159). Unfortunately, those ambitions appear to be unrealistic for many who are not able to afford education that focuses on the type of knowledge being tested in international assessments.

According to Cain, some Asian countries namely Korea, Singapore, Japan and Taiwan are able to secure high scores especially in TIMSS because these students have “soft power,” defined as quiet persistence to sustain attention to often tedious questions asked in TIMSS. Those Asian countries ranked above many Western countries in TIMSS because Asian students filled out “more of the questionnaire” than their Western competitors (p. 201).

Cain provides at least three crucial lessons that every reader of her book may take. First, love is essential, but gregariousness—having a dislike of being alone—is optional. She argues that relationships make everyone happier, even introverts, but they need to think quality over quantity. She brings several people who transformed the business and political world in significant ways to readers’ attention. For example, Stephen Wozniak, the cofounder of Apple Computer (the other being the famous Steve Jobs) was an introverted engineer. According to Cain, Wozniak’s collaboration with Jobs was central to the success of Apple Computer, but it was Wozniak who carried out the hard toiling work.

Second, for the parents of quiet children, Cain suggests helping them make peace with new situations and new people. But if the children do not like that, parents should let them be themselves: “Don’t expect them to follow the gang; rather encourage them to follow their passions” (p. 266). Similarly, for teachers, Cain suggests enjoying gregarious and participatory students, but the most important thing for teachers is cultivating the shy, the gentle, and the autonomous students who hold introverted ideals. As argued by neo-institutional theorists, because of the worldwide expansion of mass schooling often dominated by the colonial educational practices of the West (Wiseman, Astiz, & Baker, 2013), educational institutions are increasingly designed for extroverts. As a consequence, the purpose of schools has been for preparing students to survive exams that are undertaken at school, national and international levels. The exam and certificate oriented education undermines those students who have intrinsic motivation towards working intensely on the projects they care about. Cain argues that, as our educational institutions are too focused on achieving certain instrumental goals, we are left with almost no or very “little time to think and create” (p. 253).

And third, Cain asks her readers to figure out what they are meant to contribute to the world. If this requires some traits of extroversion, such as public speaking or networking, that make them comfortable, then they should practice for that. But she cautions that such practices are often difficult ones, which might need a lot of training “to make them easier” (p. 265). Giving her own examples of how much she struggled to be a corporate lawyer and a public speaker, Cain suggests: “Whoever you are, bear in mind that appearance is not reality. Some people act like extroverts, but the effort costs them in energy, authentic and even physical health” (p. 266). By introducing Free Trait Theory—which suggests that we are born and culturally endowed with certain personality traits (see pp. 209-15)—Cain suggests that “introverts are capable of acting like extroverts” and sometimes it is desirable to pretend to be extroverted even if the act is morally ambiguous.

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