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Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking: **A Book Analysis**

Molly Goaley

Abstract

The topics addressed in Susan Cain's *Quiet* are important to nonscholarly and academic audiences because introversion is a universal personality trait that affects us all in some way. If we are not introverts ourselves, we have colleagues, supervisors, family members, friends or children who are. Studies of extroversion and introversion in organizational teamwork (Zanin & Bisel, 2018), office environments (McElroy & Morrow, 2010), and leadership (Grant et al., 2011) therefore have practical implications regardless of personality type. The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast Cain's work with the existing scholarly research in order to gain a deeper understanding of introversion's role in the workplace, as well as identify limitations in the research literature.

Introverts living under the Extrovert Ideal are like women in a man's world, discounted because of a trait that goes to the core of who they are. Extroversion is an enormously appealing personality style, but we've turned it into an oppressive standard to which most of us feel we must conform (Cain, 2012, p. 4).

These are the sentences that introduce Susan Cain's (2012) passionately argued and expertly researched book, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. At least one third of the people we know are introverts: those who listen intently (Grant, Gino & Hofmann, 2011) and concentrate best in quiet spaces (McElroy & Morrow, 2010), who prefer working individually more than on teams (Henningsen & Henningsen, 2018), and who dislike self-promotion and attention (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009) but thrive on focused conversations. Cain argues that we dramatically undervalue this creative, self-motivated personality type (Hazel, Keaten & Kelly, 2014) and that we lose much in our organizations by doing so. Even in less obvious introverted occupations like law, politics and activism, she argues that some of the biggest leaps forward were made by people who "achieved what they did, not in spite of, but *because of* their introversion" (Cain, 2012, p. 6).

Cain addresses the rise of what she calls the Extrovert Ideal, or the omnipresent belief that the ideal self is gregarious, alpha and comfortable being the center of attention. She explains that our cultural focus on extroversion permeates our organizations to the point that introversion has become a second-class personality trait, "somewhere between a disappointment and a pathology" (Cain, 2012, p. 4). To embrace the Extrovert Ideal so unthinkingly is a costly mistake, as we miss out on the significant contributions that come from introverts who create and innovate by tapping into their inner worlds. The "New Groupthink" structure, or the idea that teamwork should be elevated above all else, stifles productivity for those who need solitude to get the real work done (Cain, 2012, p. 75). Additionally, failure to recognize the potential of introverts in leadership roles is a major disservice to organizations, as less extroverted leaders are more apt to listen to employees' ideas and consider their opinions in decision-making (Grant et al., 2011).

The topics addressed in *Quiet* are important to nonscholarly and academic audiences because introversion is a universal personality trait that affects us all in some way. If we are not introverts ourselves, we have colleagues, supervisors, family members, friends or children who are. Studies of extroversion and introversion in organizational teamwork (Zanin & Bisel, 2018), office environments (McElroy & Morrow, 2010), and leadership (Grant et al., 2011) therefore have practical implications regardless of personality type. The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast Cain's work with the existing scholarly

research in order to gain a deeper understanding of introversion's role in the workplace, as well as identify limitations in the research literature. I will focus on *Quiet's* concepts of teamwork, leadership, communication styles and physical environments by providing a literature review regarding introversion in organizational communication and conclude with an evaluation and critique of the book.

Author and Book

Author Biographical Sketch

Susan Cain is a self-described introvert who brings a wealth of personal and professional experience to *Quiet*. She is the chief revolutionary behind Quiet Revolution and the author of two bestsellers, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* and *Quiet Power: The Secret Strengths of Introverts*.

A former Wall Street lawyer, Cain was inspired to write *Quiet* after noticing the vast amounts of untapped potential that existed in personality types like hers in the workplace. For Cain, *Quiet* is not just a book but a mission to change how we think about introversion; to reshape workplace culture and design; and to steer away from groupthink in favor of environments that support deep reflection and focus. In addition to writing, Cain is now a public speaker on the topic of introversion and her record-breaking TED Talk has been viewed more than 19 million times (Cain, 2012).

Cain is influenced by the idea that introverts are constantly being forced to engage in practices that go against their innate nature and have been doing so their whole lives. She is particularly interested in empowering introverted children, as well as educating parents and teachers about their unique needs. She deliberately uses "introversion" as a broad term, drawing insight from Big Five psychology, Carl Jung, Jerome Kagan, Elaine Aron, and many other scholars and researchers (Cain, 2012, p. 269-270).

Book Summary

Quiet is written in a style that appeals to readers of all types, is thoroughly supported by research, and offers many true stories of unforgettable introverts like Rosa Parks, Warren Buffett, and Steve Wozniak. The book's main arguments focus on the following ideas: that much of the world embraces the Extrovert Ideal and thus undervalues introversion, and that today's schools and organizations neglect to provide an environment in which introverts can thrive and produce their best work.

Quiet is broken into four parts based on the following concepts: the Extrovert Ideal, biology as it relates to temperament, introversion as it relates to culture, and introversion as it relates to communication and relationships.

Part One explores how extroversion rose to become the cultural ideal, as well as the history and shortcomings of charismatic leadership. As American culture increasingly came to idolize the Cult of Personality over time, biases toward extroversion intensified. Early citizens of our country depended on our founding fathers to be “loudmouths” about liberty, while qualities of the more reserved were regarded with a growing disdain (Cain, 2012, p. 30). As a culture, we have been taught to idolize the charismatic, while qualities of introversion (e.g., being soft-spoken or contemplative) have traditionally been viewed as weaknesses. This section concludes with a critique of what Cain calls the “New Groupthink,” the idea that our best and most creative work comes solely from collaboration (Cain, 2012, p. 75). Cain adamantly makes the point that for at least one third of the population (introverts), solitude is a vital key to creativity. While school systems and organizations should be teaching people to work independently and providing plenty of space for solitude, they increasingly do the opposite. Moreover, when organizations force members to participate in groupthink and teamwork above all else, it consequentially stifles productivity and intellectual achievement for many (Cain, 2012).

Part Two transitions into biology’s role in temperament and how free will can be channeled into making the naturally introverted more comfortable in communicating. Cain explores developmental psychologist Jerome Kagan’s work regarding high and low reactivity in infants, which provides a tremendous amount of evidence that high reactivity is one biological basis of introversion (Cain, 2012). The temperament we are born with, Cain concludes, mixed with cultural and life experience, forms our individual personality and our likeliness to be introverted or extroverted.

Part Three explores Cain’s concept of “soft power” in the context of Asian-Americans navigating the Extrovert Ideal, and how culture plays a role in the way we perceive personality type. Without encouraging rigid national or ethnic stereotyping, Cain acknowledges the cultural differences in personality between East and West, and how qualities of introversion are often revered in Asian countries (Cain, 2012).

Part Four concludes the book by offering advice to introverts on when to act more extroverted, how to address the communication gap between the opposite types, and perhaps most importantly, how to empower quiet children. Introverted youth, she argues, are typically encouraged by well-meaning parents and teachers to act against their nature in social situations. By allowing quiet children to be themselves, however, we empower them with the confidence necessary to navigate the world in meaningful ways (Cain, 2012)

Quiet is heavily researched, with Cain citing 271 total sources in the notes section of the book. She supports her conclusions with a plethora of academic literature in psychology, sociology, and communication. In addition, she offers many anecdotal stories from popular biographies and autobiographies on introverts such as Warren Buffett, Eleanor Roosevelt, Mahatma Gandhi, Bill Gates, and others.

Literature Review and Evaluation

Though *Quiet* explores introversion mainly through the lenses of psychological and social sciences, the book's concepts go hand-in-hand with organizational communication. The following section will focus on relevant and contemporary research related to these concepts and will compare and contrast the literature to Cain's work.

Major Concepts

Teamwork, leadership, communication style, and environment are main concepts found within contemporary research related to introversion in organizational communication.

Teamwork (e.g., group work, brainstorming) is based on the idea that collective action and thought processing are more effective and efficient than individual thought and action. Additionally, as dependence on teams has increased in organizations, research has begun to examine the role of leadership in fostering team success (Morgeson, DeRue & Karam, 2010). However, extroversion's role in team satisfaction has been found to be insignificant (Medina & Srivastava, 2016). Contrarily, despite its widespread use in organizations, social scientific research has generally been unsupportive of the claimed benefits of brainstorming (Henningsen & Henningsen, 2018).

It has long been assumed that extroversion and personality trait dominance are indicators of effective leadership. While true in some cases, existing literature increasingly proves the opposite. Anderson and Kilduff (2009) suggest that dominant individuals tend to display competence-related communication cues – such as assertiveness, direct eye contact, and expansive posture – regardless of their actual level of competence. These cues in turn shape others' perceptions of the dominant individual as self-confident and highly capable of managing tasks, therefore allowing the individual to achieve influence over groups. If highly dominant individuals are perceived as competent regardless of ability to accomplish tasks, this suggests that competent individuals who display low dominance can be unjustifiably overlooked for certain positions (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009).

The way introverts and extroverts vary in communication style has a strong impact on the effectiveness of messaging (O'Carroll, 2015). Within the context of organizations, group members' collective understanding is improved when they have similar expectations about the appropriate way to communicate with one another (Park, 2008). In turn, group communication research could benefit from understanding more introverted qualities of communication style, such as politeness and efficiency, and applying them to a group work context (Park, 2008).

Finally, the environment of an organization has a strong effect on how different personality types communicate and accomplish work (Real et al., 2017). While organizations increasingly adopt open office structures to reduce costs and foster collaboration, employees are affected quite differently depending on a variety of factors such as age, espoused values and personality type (McElroy & Morrow, 2010). While one individual may thrive in an open office environment, another may feel constantly distracted and as a result, become ineffective.

Evaluation

Quiet's main concepts compare well with those found in the research literature, especially in terms of undervaluing introversion's role in the workplace. Cain claims that the New Groupthink overstates the value of working in teams rather than individually, which is supported by a number of studies. For example, Zanin & Bisel (2018) illustrate employees' need for autonomy, often best achieved by working alone, in order to negotiate identity and shape their organizational experience.

Cain emphasizes the power of quiet leadership and how embracing introversion's traits in leadership roles can provide tremendous value to organizations. In line with this view, research indicates that less extroverted leaders are more apt to listen to employees' ideas, involve them in decision-making, and make them feel like a valued part of the organization (Grant et al., 2011). Such behaviors benefit organizations by empowering employees to be more proactive and stake a greater claim in the organization's success.

Cain asserts that introverts exhibit a higher level of sensitivity among groups, and therefore demonstrate a greater need for deep, one-on-one communication style as opposed to group conversation. Similarly, Ervin et al. (2017) suggest that task accomplishment is improved when meetings are structured by topical expertise rather than letting the most dominant or extroverted personalities take the lead.

Cain consistently emphasizes the need for introverts to have quiet spaces, such as closed office structures, in which to be productive. Many studies substantiate this claim, indicating that office structure is a key factor in accomplishing tasks. For example, McElroy and Morrow's (2010) study illustrates

how employees will have very different reactions to open versus closed office structures based on a number of variables (e.g., personality type, age).

Although the concepts in *Quiet* align well with the research literature, there are also substantial differences that should be addressed. Cain argues the many benefits of working individually, yet largely disregards the vast amount of research that points to the value of teamwork on organizational outcomes. For example, one survey of high-level managers reported that 91 percent of them agreed that teams are central to organizational success (Martin & Bal, 2006, as cited in Morgeson et al., 2010). This suggests a high level of value in teamwork, regardless of personality type.

Cain's concept of quiet leadership is indeed an undervalued attribute in organizations, yet she fails to address instances of when it is better to have extroverted leaders at the helm. For example, Grant et al. (2011) suggest that employees who are less proactive respond to and accomplish tasks more efficiently under extroverted managers. Communication behavior and style is a major concept explored throughout *Quiet*, however it gives little mention of technology's role as a communication channel and introverts' level of satisfaction with it. As organizations increasingly depend on online communication for both daily operations and team projects (Medina & Srivastava, 2016), this area warrants further research.

The final contrast pertains to Cain's claim that quiet work spaces are a vital key to creativity for introverts. However, research has shown that open office spaces have been effective in increasing collaboration, employee altruism, and company support (McElroy & Morrow, 2010). *Quiet* makes the case for more autonomous work spaces in schools and organizations yet does not address the values of open office structures.

Critique

As clearly indicated in *Quiet* and supported by the research literature, society would be wise to tap into the power of introverted personalities. *Quiet* offers an insightful look into the benefits of introversion for both nonacademic and academic audiences.

The layperson will find the concepts in *Quiet* relatable, as we all have colleagues, friends, and loved ones who are introverted and many of us are introverts ourselves. Perhaps the largest benefit to the layperson is that the book is thoroughly supported by research yet is not bogged down with complicated academic language. It is presented in a simple style with many interesting examples from real-life introverts. It provides a tremendous amount of insight into how this personality type communicates while still being enjoyable to read.

A potential weakness is that *Quiet* sometimes fails to address when it is better to lean on extroverted personality types in certain situations. A section on extroverted leadership's role in combat or crisis situations, for example, would add value to Cain's arguments by adding a contrasting perspective.

A major benefit of *Quiet* is that it offers insight of this personality type from an introvert's perspective. Remarkably, while a plethora of research is said to exist on extroversion and introversion, many of the studies found for this project focused primarily on the perspective of extroversion (Hazel et al., 2014). This indicates a greater need for more research that specifically examines introversion, which Cain does well. A potential weakness is that academics may be frustrated by Cain's failure to acknowledge the benefits of extroversion that abound in scholarly research (Grant et al., 2011). While the book's intentions are to provide insight specifically on introversion, Cain's arguments could be more beneficial if they offered a contrasting perspective.

Overall, I would rate *Quiet* with four out of five stars and label it a must-read for anyone who identifies as or knows an introvert (which is everyone). My rating is based on how I felt when reading this book. I personally identified and agreed with nearly every point that Cain made in her arguments, and came away with a better understanding of myself and how to communicate better with others. I would absolutely recommend *Quiet* to my classmates. Not only does it provide a wealth of information about people in general, it relates to a multitude of concepts we have explored in organizational communication. Managers and employees alike could become better communicators simply by understanding the differences between introverts and extroverts.

Conclusion

A major takeaway is that Cain clearly points out society's tendency to embrace the Extrovert Ideal and downplay the positive aspects of introversion. Remarkably, much of the existing scholarly research also has a tendency to focus on the negative or stereotypical aspects of introversion. Dismissing the power of introversion so unthinkingly does a major disservice to society. Additionally, there is a critical need for schools and organizations to shift toward understanding and supporting this personality type through consideration of leadership roles, working environments, etc. By letting introverts be themselves instead of pressing them to conform to a certain standard, our work lives could be much improved.

In conclusion, *Quiet* is a remarkably insightful book that successfully makes the case for embracing the power of introversion, especially in organizational settings. Thanks to researchers like Cain and others, there has been a recent, significant shift in our perception of introverts and their capabilities. However, there is still much work to be done in empowering introverts, especially in

leadership roles, and allowing them to reach their true potential through embracing their unique needs.

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