

Introversion, the Legal Profession, and Dispute Resolution

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Let me ask you some questions.

- Do you generally prefer one-to-one conversations to group activities?
- Do you generally prefer to express yourself in writing than in person?
- Do you generally enjoy solitude?
- Do you generally care less than your peers about wealth, fame, and status?
- Do you generally dislike small talk but enjoy talking in depth about topics that matter to you?
- Do people often tell you that you're a good listener?
- Do you generally prefer to avoid taking risks?
- Do you generally enjoy to work with few interruptions?
- Do you generally prefer to celebrate birthdays with only a few people rather than with a big party?
- Do people often describe you as soft-spoken or mellow?
- Do you generally prefer not to show or discuss your work with others until it is finished?
- Do you generally dislike conflict?
- Do you generally do your best work on your own?
- Do you generally tend to think before you speak?
- Do you generally feel drained after being out even if you enjoyed yourself?
- Do you often let calls go through to voicemail?
- Do you generally prefer a weekend with nothing to do than one with too many things scheduled?
- Do you generally dislike multi-tasking?
- Can you generally concentrate easily?
- Do you generally prefer lecture courses to seminar courses?

Did you answer “yes” to lots of these questions? Me too.

These are common patterns of introverts, according to Susan Cain in her best-selling book, [Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking](#).

She cites studies indicating that one third to one half of the population is introverted. A recent article in the ABA Journal, [Most Lawyers Are Introverted, and That's Not Necessarily a Bad Thing](#), states, “Contrary to popular belief, most lawyers are not extroverts. In fact, 60 percent are introverts, according to Eva Wisnik, president of the legal training and placement firm Wisnik Career Enterprises in New York City. Wisnik has given the Myers-Briggs personality test to more than 6,000 attorneys since 1990.”

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Although one can question the statistics, undoubtedly a large segment of the population feel introverted. This includes many law students, lawyers, and law professors – maybe you too.

A Google search for “introversion” yields more than 136 million hits. There are more than 6,000 publications with references to introversion in the American Psychological Association PsychInfo database. Westlaw’s Law Reviews and Journals database has more than 1,000 articles referring to introversion, many of which are in bar journals, offering advice for lawyers to overcome introverted tendencies.

Ms. Cain writes, “Our place on [the introversion-extroversion] continuum influences our choice of friends and mates, and how we make conversation, resolve differences, and show love. It affects the careers we choose and whether or not we succeed at them. It governs how likely we are to exercise, commit adultery, function well without sleep, learn from our mistakes, place big bets in the stock market, delay gratification, be a good leader, and ask ‘what if.’ It’s reflected in our brain pathways, neurotransmitters, and remote corners of our nervous systems.” [footnote omitted]

I recently stumbled onto what one might call an “introverts’ liberation movement.” A lot of people feel introverted and ashamed of it because of social norms privileging extroversion and devaluing introversion. Introverted law students and lawyers may feel particularly inadequate because of images in popular media of lawyers as being extremely dynamic.

Due to the efforts of Ms. Cain and others, people who feel introverted increasingly are accepting and appreciating the benefits of their personalities. She cites research finding that introverted people generally perform better – and worse – in various ways than extroverted people.

For example, she cites psychologist Anders Ericsson’s research finding that introverted people generally prefer to work alone, which often contributes to exceptional achievement. Solitary work promotes “deliberate practice” involving identification of needed knowledge, striving, monitoring performance, and making necessary adjustments. On the other hand, extroverted people may perform better in situations requiring consultation with a lot of people and quick decision-making.

This article is another in my [What I’m Reading](#) series. It discusses Ms. Cain’s book as well as the ABA book, [The Introverted Lawyer: A Seven-Step Journey Toward Authentically Empowered Advocacy](#) by Brooklyn Law Professor Heidi K. Brown. It also highlights two terrific memoirs: [Sorry I’m Late, I Didn’t Want to Come: One Introvert’s Year of Saying Yes](#) by Jessica Pan, and [Playing with Myself](#) by Randy Rainbow.

The article concludes with my takeaways from these books, particularly for faculty who want to help introverted students and who are introverted themselves.

The Susan Cain Phenomenon

[Susan Cain](#) is a 1993 Harvard Law graduate who worked at a Wall Street firm for seven years. She then ran The Negotiation Company, consulting with a wide range of clients. She spent seven years reading scientific research, consulting with experts, and participating in activities like attending a Tony Robbins seminar in the process of writing *Quiet*, which was published in 2012. Soon after the book was published, she gave a viral [TED talk](#), which provides a good summary of the book.

In 2014, she announced the Quiet Revolution, a project to transform office architecture to provide privacy in modern offices, and she formed the Quiet Leadership Institute to help train introverted leaders and empower quiet children. In 2016, she co-authored *Quiet Power: The Secret Strengths of Introverts*, about introverted children and teens. This year, she published *Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole*, to promote appreciation of sorrow and longing, counterbalancing society's constant pressure to be positive.

Like the authors of the other books discussed in this article, Ms. Cain identifies strongly as an introvert and describes her journey of self-discovery, acceptance, and appreciation.

One writer called her “the patron saint of introverts.” Her initial *Quiet* book is like a New York Times bestseller version of an introvert’s heartfelt and nuanced manifesto.

What Is Introversion?

Ms. Cain notes that scientists disagree about how to define introversion. Introversion is on one of the dimensions of the “[big five personality traits](#),” which some psychologists believe reflect key differences between individuals. In this framework, introverts have relatively low levels of social engagement and energy. It also is on one of the four dimensions of the popular (though dubious) [Meyers-Briggs](#) personality framework, which refers to whether people prefer to focus on the “outer world or on [their] own inner world.”

Ms. Cain says that psychologists generally agree that introversion is a preference for environments that are not over-stimulating, though this glosses over differences in various conceptualizations.

She writes that research “consistently suggest[s] that introversion and extroversion, like other major personality traits such as agreeableness and conscientiousness, are about 40 to 50 percent heritable.” This implies that at least half of people’s personalities and behavior is a function of other factors such as environmental influences and individual decisions.

She writes that “[W]e can stretch our personalities, but only up to a point. Our inborn temperaments influence us, regardless of the lives we lead. A sizable part of who we are is ordained by our genes, by our brains, by our nervous systems. And yet the elasticity that Schwartz found in some of the high-reactive teens also suggests the converse: we have free will and can use it to shape our personalities.”

She endorses Prof. Brian Little’s “Free Trait Theory, [which holds that] we are born and culturally endowed with certain personality traits – introversion, for example – but we can and do act out of character in the service of ‘core personal projects.’”

There is a false dichotomy characterizing people simply as introverts or extroverts. Ms. Cain writes, “there are so many different *kinds* of introverts and extroverts. Introversion and extroversion interact with our other personality traits and personal histories, producing wildly different kinds of people.”

She writes that characteristics of introversion and extroversion occur on a continuum and some people are “ambiverts,” operating in the middle of the continuum. Even this is an oversimplification because people behave differently in different situations and cultural environments. For example, you might feel introverted when speaking in public to a large group of important strangers but feel extroverted when hanging out with a few close friends.

She summarizes a lot of research suggesting differences between “introverts” and “extroverts” tendencies and preferences such as those suggested in the questions at the beginning of this article. Readers should not rely on these generalizations in real life for several reasons. First, since there isn’t a clear, generally-accepted definition based on binary characteristics of this complex phenomenon, various researchers’ operationalizations of the concepts presumably are not consistent and may not be valid. Second, social science research produces results showing statistically significant differences, which suggest that one group generally is different than another, but these are relative differences, not absolute differences. So readers shouldn’t infer that all introverts display particular characteristics and all extroverts display different ones. Third, some of the research is based on laboratory experiments, which may have limited generalizability because of the great significance of real-life contextual factors that necessarily are absent in these experiments.

That said, the research can be helpfully suggestive. I think that introversion is a very real phenomenon, even though there isn’t a consistent definition and people may experience and manifest it differently. People who often feel introverted often do exhibit some similar patterns. So instead of relying on unqualified generalizations about “introverts” and “extroverts,” research can help people identify and address particular patterns of feelings and behavior.

Introversion is not the same as shyness, which is fear of social disapproval or humiliation. Some but not all introverted people also generally are shy.

A final word on definitions: It seems odd that the title of Ms. Cain's book – *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* – focuses on how much people talk since she writes that introverts enjoy talking one-on-one and in small groups, just not in large groups for extended periods. According to her analysis, introverts aren't necessarily quiet – they just prefer less stimulation and prefer when it is generated by themselves rather than by others.

Susan Cain's Theories of Introversion and Extroversion

Ms. Cain places her analysis of introversion in the context of what she calls the "extrovert ideal," which dominates much of Western society. She defines it as "the omnipresent belief that the ideal self is gregarious, alpha, and comfortable in the spotlight. The archetypal extrovert prefers action to contemplation, risk-taking to heed-taking, certainty to doubt. He favors quick decisions, even at the risk of being wrong. She works well in teams and socializes in groups."

She writes that, as a result of the social norm favoring extroversion:

Introversion – along with its cousins sensitivity, seriousness, and shyness – is now a second-class personality trait, somewhere between a disappointment and a pathology. 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.

She argues that this ideal is widely – and often unconsciously – accepted, including by introverts, to everyone's detriment. This is illustrated by "well-meaning but unhelpful advice that you should just jump in at the deep end and try to swim – an approach that might work, but more likely will produce panic, further encoding in your brain a cycle of dread, fear, and shame." Thus, for introverted people, the extrovert ideal can lead to anxiety, dysfunctional behavior, and failure to take advantage of their gifts related to their introversion.

She cautions that the extrovert ideal can lead to groupthink. As a result, teams don't make room for introverts' cautious analysis, and this may result in organizations making bad decisions. She writes that, contrary to popular belief – including in the dispute resolution community – a lot of research shows that face-to-face brainstorming generally is less effective than when people work alone. Well-managed online brainstorming can improve performance, however. This enables introverted people to better manage their participation.

She argues that face-to-face collaboration can promote connection and trust, and it can be productive when it involves symbiotic relationships between introverts and extroverts and tasks are allocated based on people's strengths. She writes that "introverts enjoy shutting the doors to their offices and plunging into their work,

because for them this sort of quiet intellectual activity is optimally stimulating, while extroverts function best when engaged in higher-wattage activities like organizing team-building workshops or chairing meetings.”

Relying on research indicating that differences between introversion and extroversion are based on different preferred levels of stimulation, she argues that neither one is better than the other and that people should identify and pursue their own optimal levels of stimulation.

Once you understand introversion and extroversion as preferences for certain levels of stimulation, you can begin consciously trying to situate yourself in environments favorable to your own personality – neither overstimulating nor understimulating, neither boring nor anxiety-making. You can organize your life in terms of what personality psychologists call “optimal levels of arousal” and what I call “sweet spots,” and by doing so feel more energetic and alive than before. Your sweet spot is the place where you’re optimally stimulated. You probably seek it out already without being aware that you’re doing so.

Noting the social bias favoring extroversion and the under-appreciated capabilities of introverted people, she offers advice to parents, teachers, romantic partners, and organizational leaders about how to respect, appreciate, and nurture people who feel introverted. Her approach not only is a humane way to treat people, but it also promotes their happiness and contributions to others.

Heidi Brown’s Advice for Law Students and Lawyers Coping with Introversion

Professor [Heidi K. Brown](#), Brooklyn Law School’s Director of Legal Writing, wrote *The Introverted Lawyer* to help law students and lawyers overcome problems related to introversion. She provides a detailed account of her own “nine-year journey of self-discovery” as a lawyer in three law firms and law professor dealing with expectations of extroversion.

She writes that introverted law students and lawyers are made to feel ashamed as if there is something wrong with them. Expectations of extroversion push them outside the natural range of their temperaments, which can produce great anxiety. This also describes the situation of law professors, and many of us grapple with our own introversion.

She writes that good legal practice involves common strengths of introverted lawyers such as empathy, intellectual humility, active listening, fact gathering, researching, analytical thinking, creative problem-solving, legal writing, effective communication, persuasion, and resolving conflicts. Obviously, most of these characteristics are the same that make for good negotiators, mediators, and other dispute resolution professionals.

She critiques the way that the “Socratic method” is commonly used in law schools – especially “cold calling” on students – which she describes is essentially the polar opposite of Socrates’s actual approach. She is particularly critical of the “fake it till you make it” philosophy. Lawyers regularly do need to appear in court and engage in other difficult social situations, but she argues that faculty could use other techniques that would better help introverted students perform in these situations.

Like Ms. Cain (who she cites, among others), Prof. Brown encourages law students and lawyers to be true to themselves and take advantage of their strengths. To counteract pressures to be extroverted, she recommends a seven-step process involving:

1. Mental Reflection - Paying attention to negative messages in anticipation of and during interpersonal interactions.
2. Physical Reflection - Noticing physical reactions in anticipation of and during interactions.
3. Mental Action - Ejecting unhelpful past messages and writing affirmatively motivating messages.
4. Physical Action - Adopting new physical stances, postures, and movement techniques to better manage excess energy during interpersonal interactions.
5. Action Agenda - Planning actions to capitalize on quiet strengths and amplify authentic voices.
6. Pre-Game and Game Day Action - Developing personalized mental and physical routines, and consciously integrating new mental messages and physical adjustments.
7. Post-Action Reflection, and Paying it Forward - Reflecting on successes and challenges, tweaking routines and authentic persona, and sharing experiences to empower others.

The Introverted Lawyer includes two helpful appendixes summarizing her suggestions for law professors and law practice mentors. You might recommend this book and [Prof. Brown’s articles](#) to students struggling with introversion, particularly public speaking. The ABA published her 2019 book, [Untangling Fear in Lawyering!: A Four-Step Journey Toward Powerful Advocacy](#), as well as her latest book, [The Flourishing Lawyer: A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Performance and Well-Being](#). [This post discusses all three books.](#)

Jessica Pan’s Year-Long Quest to Expand Her Comfort Zone

I began this exploration of introversion by reading *Sorry I’m Late, I Didn’t Want to Come: One Introvert’s Year of Saying Yes*. Here’s the publisher’s description:

What would happen if a shy introvert lived like a gregarious extrovert for one year? If she knowingly and willingly put herself in perilous social situations that she'd normally avoid at all costs? Writer Jessica Pan intends to find out. With the help of various extrovert mentors, Jessica sets up a series of personal challenges (talk to strangers, perform stand-up comedy, host a dinner party, travel alone, make friends on the road, and much, much worse) to explore whether living like an extrovert can teach her lessons that might improve the quality of her life. Chronicling the author's hilarious and painful year of misadventures, this book explores what happens when one introvert fights her natural tendencies, takes the plunge, and tries (and sometimes fails) to be a little bit braver.

Ms. Pan is a free-lance writer who does a terrific job of very candidly telling her own story, mixing in occasional references to research about introversion and conversations with sundry experts.

For introverted folks, reading this book may be like watching a horror movie. You can vicariously feel the thrilling terror of her experiences in the safe comfort of your home, knowing that it is not happening to you and you can put the book down at any time. For example, her chapter describing doing stand-up comedy can stir up deep feelings of dread as we imagine trying this ourselves. Many of her quests are less harrowing – like initiating conversations with strangers – and readers might get ideas of ways they might try to expand their comfort zones.

At the end of her odyssey – spoiler alert – Ms. Pan feels more confident and can choose to do more extroverted things than when she started. She recognizes that she still is an introvert – but more of a gregarious introvert than a shy one. She says, “I really like my comfort zone, but I also know I’ll be ok if I leap into the unknown or the scary for a little while.”

She has a lovely written voice, which comes through especially well in the audiobook. The book is a hoot, which I definitely recommend.

The Randy Rainbow Experience

Randy Rainbow – yes, that’s his real name, he immediately informs you – is an amazing social media star. His book, *Playing with Myself*, is in the genre of a struggling artist who becomes an improbable success in show business. In this case, the protagonist is a shy, introverted, gay Jew who invents his own niche making video parodies all by himself in his apartment.

If you don’t know who he is, stop reading now and [watch this video](#) to get a sense of his persona. This video is called “Sedition,” featuring a song sung to the tune of “Tradition” from *Fiddler on the Roof*. He posted it two days after the January 6 insurrection and it has gotten more than 3 million views.

The first half of the book tells the story of his life up to the time when he really made it in show business. The second half is a grab-bag of chapters about various things such as his relationships with big stars and embarrassing experiences. People who are diehard Randy Rainbow fans or show biz aficionados might particularly enjoy the second half.

The first half is the sad account of the making of an introvert. Mr. Rainbow – I'm sure he loves being called that – was an effeminate boy who loved theater, dance, and music, especially Broadway musicals. When he was growing up, he wore coke-bottle glasses. So he was mercilessly bullied by boys at school. He was ostracized and had few friends. But he had a knack for performing, and he starred in many school plays.

His parents regularly had loud arguments, so he usually locked himself in his room to avoid their fights. As he grew older, his father became emotionally abusive to him as well. He compensated by overeating, causing him to be overweight, making things even worse.

Mr. Rainbow was fortunate to have a very caring and supportive mother and grandmother. They loved the Broadway theater, and he went to a lot of shows and amassed a great collection of recordings. While hiding out in his room, he immersed himself in these recordings and developed an encyclopedic knowledge of show business.

He grew up in Long Island and his family moved to South Florida when he was 10. After he graduated from high school and dropped out of community college, he moved to New York City, hoping to make it on Broadway. Naturally, he didn't make it in the theater, so he took jobs as a host at restaurants and as a receptionist.

After years in these dead-end jobs, he started writing a humorous blog and creating videos. His breakout started with a [video of him supposedly having a phone call with Mel Gibson](#), who he supposedly was dating. This followed the release of Mr. Gibson's anti-Semitic, anti-gay voicemail rants. Since Mr. Rainbow is a gay Jew, he satirized Mr. Gibson by interspersing clips of the voicemails as part of a purported conversation with his boyfriend, Mr. Gibson.

Over time, his videos became more sophisticated – but still all a one-man production using a green screen in his apartment. Things really took off as Donald Trump ran for president, and Mr. Rainbow released a video, [Ya Got Trump Trouble!](#) set to the tune of "Ya Got Trouble," from *The Music Man*. After Mr. Trump became president, Mr. Rainbow produced lots of videos spoofing Mr. Trump and his allies. He built a growing following of people who were horrified by the president and looked to the videos as a kind of therapy. When the covid pandemic hit, he continued producing videos in quarantine from his apartment.

At the very end of the book, he gave a general apology for not responding to invitations and text messages. He said, "I was busy writing, stewing, singing, sulking, reflecting,

recharging, bingeing, planning, filming, worrying, thinking, aching, creating.” He explained:

I’m finally ready to say, my name is Randy Rainbow, yes really, and I’m a hardcore, out and proud, full blown INTROVERT. Sorry, that was kind of loud. I’m no longer ashamed to admit it. I deeply love being alone and it served me well. I’ve spent a lot of time throughout the years locked in my room, hiding from scary fathers, global pandemics, and sometimes just life itself. Sure, it’s been lonely at times, but certainly not without its perks. It’s where I discovered myself and ultimately the power to express and create in ways I never thought I could. Having said that, the past eighteen months have also taught me just how much I love people. Some of them anyway. As exhausting as they can be, I thrive on other people. I need them, dammit. In fact, it is my belief that people who need people are the luckiest people in the – fine, I didn’t write that either.

If you like his videos, you probably will love his book. Although the title – *Playing with Myself* – obviously is a sexual double entendre, it also reflects a non-sexual pattern of introverted people.

You would be a damned fool to read the book instead of listening to the audio version. He performs it with the same voice as in the videos. The audiobook includes some impersonations, audio clips, and even music. So don’t be a damned fool.

So What Have We Learned?

These books show that introversion is a real thing. It’s just not the same thing for everyone. There are many different combinations of causes and consequences of people’s introverted feelings, sensitivities, reactions, preferences, and behaviors. So, rather than relying on broad generalizations, we should focus on particular individuals and situations.

Introversion is not inherently better or worse than extroversion. People with each tendency have complementary strengths and weaknesses in particular aspects of their lives. Ideally, people with both tendencies would symbiotically take advantage of their respective strengths.

There is a social bias favoring extroversion in Western societies. People who feel introverted often feel that there is something wrong with them because they aren’t comfortable acting more outgoing.

It is telling that the authors of all four books described above went on personal journeys to overcome their introversion. They needed to undertake serious, sustained efforts to build their self-esteem and confidence in the face of the extroversion bias. They learned to function better in large groups and in public, but they still feel introverted at heart.

We should especially appreciate introverted people, who generally are worthy individuals and often provide great benefits to others. Indeed, we may need to help them be compassionate to themselves and recognize that their introverted tendencies are natural and often quite valuable.

We should help people who feel naturally extroverted to better understand introverted people, who may seem to be a lesser class of people. Extroverted folks are likely to regularly deal with them considering that a large proportion of the population has introverted tendencies. Moreover, extroverted folks often could benefit by adopting some of the benefits of introversion just as introverted people can benefit from learning to be more extroverted when they want.

Considering images of lawyers in popular culture as extroverts, it may be surprising that the legal field attracts many people who feel introverted. On reflection, this shouldn't be so surprising considering that much legal work involves reading, thinking, and writing – generally solitary activities. Many people become lawyers out of a desire to help others, reflecting empathy that is common for introverted people.

Legal education often isn't kind to introverted students. Although law students need to be prepared to function effectively in court, there are better ways to teach students than the way many faculty run their classes, as Heidi Brown describes. Introverted students would benefit reading her book and articles directed to introverted lawyers.

The population of law school faculty is likely to consist of an even larger proportion of introverted people than practicing lawyers. Much academic work is solitary, and even when faculty teach their classes, they have a lot of control. Even so, introverted faculty may feel anxious when teaching, interacting with colleagues, and giving presentations.

The dispute resolution field, particularly mediation, also probably attracts many people who feel introverted for the same reasons as described above – and probably even more. They generally are good listeners, prefer to minimize risk and conflict, and like to think before they speak.

So people in the legal and dispute resolution fields should be especially attentive to problems of introversion. Many of us – and I'm guessing that includes you, dear reader – grapple with this ourselves. We should be compassionate and supportive to ourselves and others who have these challenges. Introverted people have a lot to offer, especially if we can ignore harmful messages reflected in the extrovert ideal.

All four books described in this article have valuable lessons, especially for people struggling with introversion. Susan Cain's book offers suggestions in a wide range of contexts of everyday life. Heidi Brown's book provides a systematic process for analyzing and changing one's behavior, which is particularly relevant for law students and lawyers but also potentially helpful to others. Jessica Pan's book describes a wonderful collection of exercises that people might try – like talking more with strangers or taking a comedy improv class.

Randy Rainbow's book is a remarkable account of being authentic, which ultimately helped him come out as an introvert. His story also illustrates kids' challenges as they grow up feeling different and bullied – as well as the effects of either loving or abusive parents. He had the challenge of growing up gay in the 1980s and 1990s, but many other things can stunt the growth of introverted kids and adults throughout our lifetimes.

The good news is that there are things that introverted people can do to improve our reactions to difficult situations. A first step may be compassionately accepting ourselves as worthy people even though we do not “live up” to the extrovert ideal. We can appreciate our gifts arising from our introverted nature. We can try to find or create the “sweet spot” of our own optimal levels and situations for stimulation and interaction with others. We can decide to expand our comfort zones in specific ways through reflection and practice. For example, introverted law students and lawyers can choose to focus on types of practice that don't require a lot of court appearances, like tax law or estate planning, and also learn to be more comfortable making arguments when needed. We can choose to develop careers focusing on dispute resolution involving careful listening and communication.