

4 More Layers of People That Are Confused with or Compound with Introversion

Awareness of introversion as a normal and healthy trait in over half of the population is growing. With the release of Susan Cain's *Quiet* in 2012, a quiet revolution has begun. Slowly the bias toward extroversion in the West that has been assumed for so long is beginning to be questioned.

As I continue to study the topic of introversion and to reflect on my own experiences as an introvert, however, there are four more layers that seem to be latently connected to or are frequently confused with the construct of introversion. For this reason, it is hard for me or for anyone to fully dissect these various aspects of self that have so deeply shaped us as individuals. Human beings are incredibly and intricately complex creatures.

Whenever we speak of introversion, it is important to define terms. I have defined introversion as "a slower-paced, inward-oriented, stimulus-averse trait that affects an individual's thinking, feeling and behavior (Johnson, 2015). As you can see, my definition, highly influenced by Hans Eysenck's, incorporates sensitivity to outside stimulation within it. For this reason, it may have some significant overlap to the trait of high sensitivity (HSP) discussed below.

This process of self-discovery can be a bit confusing. It can be difficult to discern our own uniqueness or commonalities. We all have differing temperaments (including our introversion, ambiversion or extroversion), differing backgrounds, differing families of origin, differing cultures, differing genders, etc. A large part of who we are, but not

definitively, can be traced to our innate or inherited traits. Our nature as received interacts with the nurture we receive or fail to receive and our responses, all combining to shape our ultimate personality. Beyond that, we all have the ability to adapt who we are by exercising our free traits for a time, being different than our natural temperament for the sake of others or for a cause (Little, 2014).

Though introversion is a large part of who many of us are at the core, it is not the only defining characteristic. It would be a mistake to over-identify with this one aspect of self. In fact, there are at least four more layers of humans, each of which is sometimes misunderstood as or comingled with introversion, but which should be discussed and understood separately:

1. Sensitivity (HSPness)

Some introverts (and some extroverts) are also highly sensitive people (HSPs). As Dr. Elaine Aron (1998) defines it, this trait that is reflected in fifteen to twenty percent of the population is essentially an inherited trait related to a more highly sensitive nervous system. Though the trait “has a high correlation with introversion, approximately thirty percent of HSPs are extroverts” (Zeff, 2010). Dr. Aron has found over many years of scientific research that 30 percent of HSPs are extroverts and 70 percent are introverts. Dr. Aron and others have demonstrated that this trait of sensitivity occurs in approximately twenty percent of the human population as well as over 120 species within the animal kingdom.

If you are unfamiliar with the literature on HSPs or Dr. Aron, a recently released documentary called *Sensitive: The Untold Story*, is a great introduction (Foundation, 2015). The construct of high-sensitivity can be described using the acronym DOES which stands for:

- Deep processing
- Overstimulation
- Emotional reactivity / Empathy
- Sensitivity to subtle stimuli

As I have come to understand the nature of high sensitivity, I see this aspect as a core aspect of who I am, perhaps deeper than my introversion or potentially interwoven together with it.

I have two close personal friends who are both clearly extroverted and yet who completely connect with the construct of highly sensitive people. For this reason, they understand at a significant level some of the feelings I have felt about being misunderstood in our society. We connect, in part, around something that may be deeper than introversion. I do suspect, however, that their extroversion affords them a certain level of protection that I don't experience. For me, I identify separately with being an introvert and being highly sensitive.

2. Intelligence (Giftedness, Brightness)

In general, introverts have a slightly higher average IQ than extroverts. Some introverts, and some extroverts, possess much higher than average levels of IQ than the general population. This is sometimes referred to as being "gifted" or "bright."

As described by James Webb (2013), those who are bright or gifted have common struggles and challenges related to idealism, seeking for deeper meaning and justice, and the disillusionment that results from the lack of the realization of those ideals in society. For this reason, they often struggle with what Webb calls *existential depression*, the healthy emotional response to the brokenness in the world around them. These gifted individuals often have what Kazimierz Dabrowski referred to as *overexcitabilities*,

heightened responses to stimulation. As Webb (2013) points out, "bright people often experience life more idealistically, intensely, and sensitively than others."

For this reason and others, they often find themselves switching majors in college, having many jobs or even careers due to their incessant search for meaning, their heightened excitability or sensitivity, and an insatiable intellectual curiosity. Giftedness, while certainly a blessing, has a clear dark side as well. For the gifted introvert, this combination can lead to greater feelings of existential isolation and being misunderstood by society at large. It is then possible to be a gifted, highly sensitive introvert.

This construct of brightness seems to have some significant overlap with Dr. Aron's HSP theory. Many of these gifted, creative individuals are also highly sensitive. As they deeply process things around them, they connect dots between present and past experiences. According to Dr. Aron, "Combining ideas in novel ways is the essence of creativity" (Foundation, 2015). For this reason, we may also be able to connect the trait of creativity.

3. Creativity

Creativity, most likely, has a significant correlation to the traits of HSP and/or giftedness. For this reason, it is sometimes connected, whether validly or not, to the frequently but not necessarily related trait of introversion (Remember 70% of HSPs are introverted). Many artists, actors, writers, musicians and other high creatives are introverts as well. Most, but not all, of the scientists who have made significant contributions to humankind were and are introverts. Many have pointed to the need for long periods of time in isolation related to the most creative endeavors in science or the arts.

Surprisingly, most people in the U.S. will by default connect creativity to extroversion. They reason that outgoing,

spontaneous, visionary people are the most creative. Because extroverts can think on their feet, in the moment, and do better in brainstorming sessions, many conclude that they have all the best and most creative ideas. This is not always or even often the case. As Susan Cain (2012) has pointed out, "Groups famously follow the opinions of the most dominant or charismatic person in the room, even though there's zero correlation between being the best talker and having the best ideas—I mean zero." Much of what is connected with creativity has to do with the ability to process information over time at a deep level to make the kinds of connections Dr. Aron describes above.

This may create an entirely different set of challenges for the extroverted creative. They may feel misunderstood, even by creative introverts. This underlines the potential confusion in understanding self and why no one trait alone defines us.

Could it be that many of us on the introverted side of life will also benefit from a clearer understanding of this often misunderstood trait of a minority in the midst of a society of less creative pragmatists? Of all the constructs discussed in this article, this is likely the least understood today. Much research and thinking is being conducted as we speak, seeking to understand the nature of highly creative people.

4. Social Anxiety (a.k.a. Shyness)

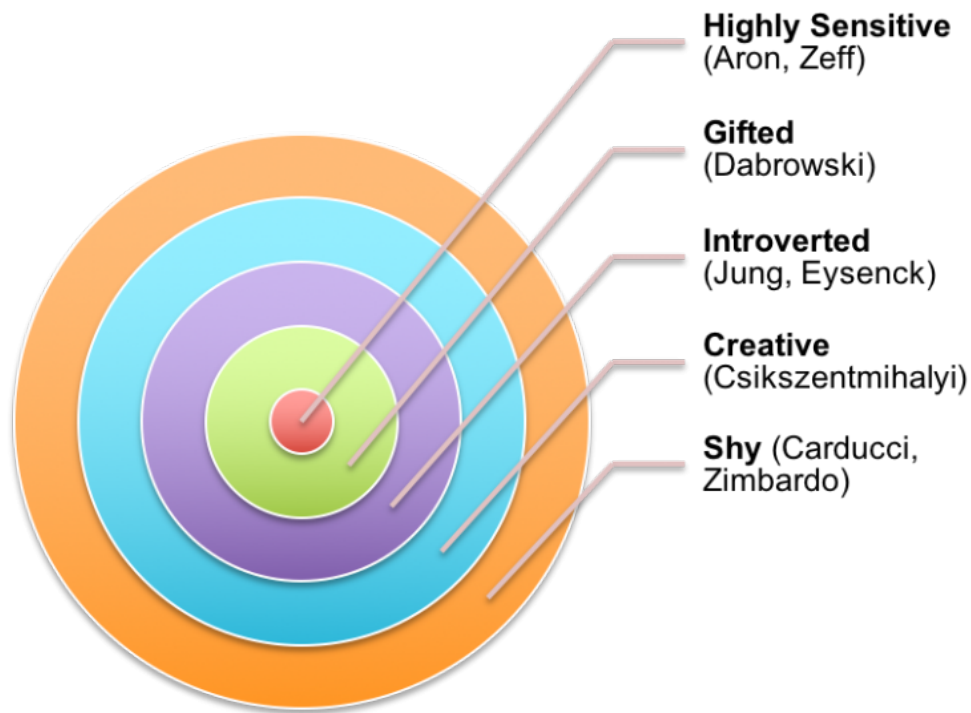
One of the most common myths about introversion is that it is synonymous with shyness. I sadly yet wholeheartedly agree with Beth Buelow that "there is a collapsing of the definitions of introvert and shy" (2012, p. 7). Shyness is different than introversion. It is essentially social anxiety, a fear of interacting with others that causes one to withdraw (Carducci & Zimbardo, 1995). Both extroverts and introverts can struggle with social anxiety or shyness. In fact, it has been demonstrated that one of the most painful

combinations of traits is extroversion and shyness; these people want desperately to connect with many around them and yet feel the pain of isolation as their shyness and social anxiety hinders them from doing so.

For many introverts who are also shy, I suspect that their shyness may well be the result of social rejection over time that has resulted in the fear of putting oneself out again, withdrawing rather than re-experiencing the pain of social rejection and being misunderstood. The reason, then, that many introverts may also be shy may be a direct result of the cultural bias in the West that marginalizes them.

Shyness, unlike a temperamental trait, is learned behavior and can be overcome through the development of social skills. Introversion cannot. It is a core temperamental trait that is at the heart of the individual, their cognitive and neural patterns, energy management system, etc. High sensitivity, giftedness, and innate creativity similarly seem to be more fixed traits of certain people. Shyness, if present, would be a learned reaction to the environment around them.

In trying to understand the relationship between these sometimes similar and potentially overlapping constructs, it may help to draw a picture. Here's how I would represent these various layers of human personality, temperament, or behavior:



As pictured, the trait of high sensitivity or non-sensitivity may well be near the center of the individual. Significantly related to that trait and potentially overlapping, is the trait of giftedness. As discussed, these two may have some significant correlations to innate traits related to creativity. Next would likely be introversion, the way an individual connects with the world, reacts to stimulation, and renews energy. Creativity expressed, for introverts or extroverts, might come next. Lastly, and importantly differentiated from the other four would be shyness or social anxiety. While the three layers nearest the center are most likely innate temperamental traits, shyness and actualized creativity are learned or unlearned behaviors in response to the environment. It is no surprise that many of those who have the three inner traits may also have developed shyness additionally or that they have squelched their inner creativity. These wonderful qualities of childish inventiveness and naïve trust may well have been shamed out of them.

For me, I identify with the three inner layers and resonate with the issues people who identify as HSP, gifted, or

introverted deal with. I sometimes refer to this as the “trifecta.” If you also are a highly sensitive, gifted, introvert, I believe you understand what I’m talking about.

I would also attest to being a frustrated and often hindered creative. As Brene Brown (2012) says, “shame is a straight jacket for creativity.” We may have been creative as children, but our naïve creativity was diminished in response to a critical or shaming environment. We stopped putting ourselves out there. Having our work and ourselves rejected became too painful, so we just conformed. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996) points out, creativity may be closely related to flow and well being, things greatly affected by our environment.

For the most part, I, as well as many other introverts, do not identify with shyness, however. I am a social introvert who loves meeting new people and engaging at a substantial level with them about things that matter. While I’ll admit to being more quiet than my extroverted colleagues in a meeting which I am not leading, it is not due to social anxiety but rather to feeling unprepared to give an answer in the moment that can be improved upon through deeper reflection.

Each of these concepts that are often confused with introversion deserve in-depth examination. Who we are, in reality, is a combination of many factors including our relationship to introversion and each of these four, affected perhaps most profoundly by our key attachment relationships throughout the life span. In any case, it is helpful to distinguish introversion from some of these potentially related dimensions. It does, however, make the conversation more complicated. This is fine for most introverts, but may grate on our less-introverted colleagues, who already think we overcomplicate everything.

References:

Aron, E. (1998). *The highly sensitive person: How to thrive*

- when the world overwhelms you.* New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.
- Aron, E. (2002). *The highly sensitive child: Helping our children thrive when the world overwhelms them.* New York, NY: Harmony Books.
- Aron, E. (2010). *Psychotherapy and the highly sensitive person: Improving outcomes for that minority of people who are the majority of clients.* New York, NY: Routledge.
- Brown, B. (2012). TED Talk: Listening to shame.
- Buelow, B. (2012). *Insight: Reflections on the gifts of being an introvert.*
- Cain, S. (2012). TED Talk: The power of introverts.
- Carducci, B., & Zimbardo, P. (1995). Are you shy? *Psychology Today*, 28(6), 34-47.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996). *Creativity: Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention.* New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Foundation for the Study of Highly Sensitive Persons. (2015). *Sensitive: The untold story* [DVD].
- Johnson, A. (2015). *Introvert revolution: Leading authentically in a world that says you can't.* Eagle, ID: Aloha Publishing.
- Little, B. (2014). *Me, myself and us: The science of personality and the art of well-being.* New York, NY: Public Affairs.
- Webb, J. T. (2013). *Searching for meaning: Idealism, bright minds, disillusionment, and hope.* Tucson, AZ: Great Potential Press.
- Zeff, T. (2010). *The strong, sensitive boy: Help your son*

become a happy, confident man. San Ramon, CA: Prana
Publishing.