

As Social Distancing Ends, Will Personality Type Affect How We Re-engage?
The Wired Word for the Week of May 9, 2021

In the News

"When the social floodgates open, not everyone will want to use their newfound freedom in the same way."

That's the subtitle of an April 27 article in *The Atlantic*. It projects that as vaccination rates go up and social-distance and shelter-in-place restrictions are finally withdrawn, people will use their freedom differently, depending on where they are on the introversion-extraversion* spectrum.

The article is not so much a detailed explanation of how those two personality types interact with the world as it is a dialog between an interviewer and one woman, Katherine Wu, who is an introvert, and another woman, Amanda Mull, who is an extravert. Prompted by questions from the interviewer, the two explain how they personally will respond when social restrictions are removed.

Mull states that she lives in New York City, and we surmise from their discussion that Wu lives in a similar environment, where a densely packed population has necessitated strictly observed social distancing during the pandemic. Apparently both women were used to having easy access to the big-city social scene prior to the arrival of Covid-19.

Extraversion and introversion, terms coined by psychiatrist Carl Jung, are not synonyms for, respectively, "boldness" and "shyness." Rather they refer to opposite ways of recharging one's emotional batteries. In general, extraverts get recharged by being with people. Introverts find renewal by spending time alone or with one or two intimate friends. Introverts, no less than extraverts, may have many good friends. Unlike extraverts, however, introverts prefer to be with their friends singly or just a few at a time; they don't want them all together at once.

Introverts tend to be most comfortable with work that involves ideas. They like activity that takes place in their inner world. It is significant that among tournament chess champs, playing a game that requires carefully plotted mental strategies, introverts outnumber extraverts by three to one.

Extraverts prefer active work with people and things; they favor the outer world. Extraverts have an introverted side, but favor extraversion in much the same way that right-handed people prefer to use their right hand; it seems more natural to do so. Likewise, introverts have an extraverted mode, but it is a recessive function. Both can use the recessive side, but it requires a greater expenditure of energy.

Introversion and extraversion are not absolute personality settings. Very few people are 100 percent one or the other. Rather, introversion and extraversion exist on a spectrum (or more likely, a bell curve). There is also a middle position on that spectrum where a person could be an ambivert, one whose personality has a balance of extraverted and introverted features.

While psychologists say everyone falls somewhere on that spectrum, the introversion-extraversion sliding scale is but one of four different scales used by the most well-known personality-type questionnaire, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), to sort for personality differences. By the measurements of the MBTI, individuals can fall into one of 16 different personality types, but even within any one of those 16 types, one individual's personality can differ from another's by degrees of intensity.

In the *Atlantic* article, the interviewer proposed an imaginary scale with extreme introvert being negative 10, extreme extravert being positive 10 and zero being true neutral (ambivert), and asked the two women where they would place themselves along the scale.

Mull, the extravert, put herself at a positive seven.

Wu, the introvert, estimated that she is a negative six, though she objected to the negative connotation.

When asked why she saw herself as a positive seven, Mull said, "The difference between being energized or drained by being around other people and being energized or drained by being by yourself seems like the most reasonable way to think about that. I just really like being around other people. I like being in a crowded bar. I like being on a subway train and just looking at everybody. I like people-watching. I like the energy of a situation in which there are a lot of people talking and being together. I find myself recharged by those situations. And it doesn't mean that I dislike being by myself at home. There are definitely times for that."

Wu responded, "Amanda, when you were rattling off all those things that give you energy, I felt my heart rate go up, which was a big flag for me that I have identified my correct allegiance. I see myself as an introvert not because I'm a complete agoraphobe or don't like people, but because I don't derive any energy from being around other people. It drains me. I recuperate and gain energy from being alone. I appreciate the presence of other people. But I think what I desperately need in my life is the ability to control when I am around them. ... I like being able to set aside alone time and know that for these next three hours I don't have to deal with anyone else. I think small talk is the tax that God exacted for the privilege of human speech."

At the end of the interview, both women agreed they want the pandemic to end and to be able to see their friends -- both those who are extraverts and those who are introverts -- which made us at *The Wired Word* think that the *Atlantic* article headline, "The Coming Conflict Between Introverts and Extroverts," was misleading. It didn't sound like either Wu or Mull expected their personality differences to result in conflict, but simply in differences each could respect in the other regarding the pace at which they return to social freedom.

* We are using the spelling "extravert" and "extraversion" rather than the "extrovert" and "extroversion" that *The Atlantic* employs because the spellings with the "a" are the preferred forms in the field of psychology and because they make more sense etymologically.

Applying the News Story

Since *The Wired Word* is intended to facilitate discussion in *church* groups, it's fair to ask what personality type has to do with matters of Christian faith. We believe the answer to that question comes from the apostle Paul, who wrote, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

Our personality differences, we believe, are among the spiritual gifts, and through our personalities, we can each, uniquely, serve the Lord.

The Big Questions

1. Bearing in mind that introversion and extraversion refer to what things drain your energy and what things recharge your energy (and *not* to your degree of shyness or boldness), where would you put yourself on the imaginary sliding scale proposed in the *Atlantic* article:

(introvert) -10 -9 -8 -7 -6 -5 -4 -3 -2 -1 (0=ambivert) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (extravert)?

2. In what church-oriented and spiritual endeavors do you think your personality type hinders you? In what church-oriented and spiritual endeavors do you think your personality type helps you?

3. In what sorts of situations, if any, do you think God would want you to step beyond the boundaries of your personality type, and why?

4. How does understanding yourself aid you in your human relationships? Is a deep level of self-understanding likely to make you more or less judgmental about others? Explain your answer.
5. Might the outcome of learning more about how you function in social situations be something you didn't want to know? Might the outcome of praying for self-knowledge be something you didn't want to know? Explain your answers.
6. What social activities are you planning to do as soon as it is judged safe (or reasonably low-risk) to do? Why? Or are you already doing them?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Exodus 4:10-13

But Moses said to the LORD, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Then the LORD said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak." But he said, "O my Lord, please send someone else."

Questions: How much dread do you suppose Moses felt each time he had to confront Pharaoh about letting the Israelites leave Egypt? How do you think the work of leading the recalcitrant Israelites out of Egypt left Moses feeling each day?

If Moses were a member of your church, for what committee would you recruit him? Why?

Luke 15:8-9

Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost."

Question: Do you think all of this woman's friends and neighbors were eager to come to her party? Why or why not?

If this woman were a member of your church, for what committee would you recruit her? Why?

Matthew 26:33-35

Peter said to him, "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you." Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." Peter said to him, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And so said all the disciples.

John 6:8-9

One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to [Jesus], "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"

Questions: If Peter and Andrew were members of your church, would you put them on the same committee? Why or why not?

Lamentations 3:40

Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD.

Questions: What role did self-understanding play in your journey toward God? What have you discovered about yourself regarding your comfort level being around people during times when they are in sorrow, going through trials and/or feeling pressure?

Responding to the News

You might be interested in taking this quick introversion-extraversion survey. Bear in mind that the results are an indication at best, not a definitive conclusion.

Answer True or False:

1. When I am at a party I tend to talk to one or two friends at a time, rather than being the center of attention.
2. When I need to introduce myself to someone new, I have no trouble and do not hesitate.
3. After talking to people or interacting with the world in some way, I feel drained of energy.
4. I feel a little on edge and don't know quite what to do with myself when I am alone.
5. When planning a project with someone, I have the best ideas if they have given me time to think about something ahead of time.
6. Talking out loud to someone helps me to have the best ideas about a project.
7. When I talk, I have already done a lot of thinking about what I say before I say it.
8. I usually share a lot of personal information about myself, my family, and my problems with someone I am just getting to know.
9. I feel energized by being alone and having time to read, think and reflect.
10. Many times I am surprised by some of the things that I say.
11. I may think about something so long and so hard that I forget to share the conclusions with the person with whom I began the thoughts.
12. I can share my private thoughts and feelings easily.

Scoring:

Step One: Go back over the quiz and change all of the even numbered questions to the opposite of what you answered. (Change every T to F and every F to T)

Step Two: Now count the number of True answers you have for all of the questions (counting only the changed answers for the even numbered questions).

Interpretation: If you had ...

0-5, chances are you are not an introvert.

6-9, you have some introverted tendencies.

10-12, you are likely to be an introvert.

Survey is from "How an Introverted Pastor Survives," by TWW team member Stan Purdum and pastoral counselor Mark Bishop. Published in *The Circuit Rider*.