

Social Construction of Personality: An Assessment on the Perceptions of Introversion and Extroversion among Undergraduates of Colombo, Sri Lanka

TN Wijewickrama^{1#} and LS Liyanage²

*Department of Social Sciences,
Faculty of Management, Social Sciences and Humanities
General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University*

tiraniwijewickrama@gmail.com

Abstract: This study explored the ways in which undergraduates of Colombo, Sri Lanka perceive introverted and extroverted personalities, with the main objective being to understand how the participants viewed introversion and extroversion and the possible contribution that can be made by these perceptions to form systems that are designed to facilitate only one personality type and the consequent problems caused by them. The data was collected by conducting 21 semi-structured interviews with undergraduates from public universities coming under the University Grants Commission (UGC), public universities not coming under the UGC and private universities in Colombo, Sri Lanka. In the interviews, the participants were asked open-ended questions about their perceptions of introversion and extroversion. Gathered qualitative data was analyzed using the thematic analysis method. The findings of this study show that among many other things, introverts are perceived mostly as less social people, who are more suited for individual work than group work, and extroverts are perceived mostly as social people who are capable of group work. This study is significant because by exploring the ways in which the participants perceive personality, it creates awareness of oppressing effects of social constructions of personality, and lay a foundation for the ultimate transformation of systems geared

towards one personality type, be it extroversion or introversion.

Keywords: Extroversion, Introversion, Perceptions, Undergraduates

Introduction

A. Background of the Study

Introversion and extroversion explain two attitude-types characterized by the concentration of interest on one's inner psychic activity or the concentration of interest on the external world respectively (Jung C. , 1995), and is thought to be the single most important aspect of personality that influences almost all facets of life.

This study talks of 'social constructions' because perceptions the public has of introverts and extroverts are constructed understandings of personality that form the basis for shared assumptions of reality. Personality may also be thought of as a social creation based on behaviors and the social meanings attached to them (Hampson, 1988). Based on the therefore established fact that personality is a social construction, this study questions the ways in which the participants define the reality of personality.

Research shows that most cultures have a bias towards either introverts or extroverts. For example, American culture is one that has always at least to some degree favored action over contemplation (Cain, 2012), where action is a trait of

extroverts and contemplation a trait of introverts. Some traditional classrooms in Asian countries, on the other hand, tend to discourage students speaking freely in classes through reprimanding etc., there by not allowing extroverted students to function according to their inborn tendencies. These systems, ideals, cultures as well as perceptions, that lead to introverts and extroverts being prevented from functioning according to their innate inclinations result in them not functioning at their full potential and causes a large wastage of energy and talent. This loss of potential is evident in a study which proved that introverts and extroverts need different levels of stimulation from the external environment to function at maximum efficiency (Geen R. G., 1984). It was found that when introverts and extroverts were given math problems to solve in environments of varying background sound that the extroverts performed better while listening to more sound, while the introverts performed better in quieter environments (Cain, 2012).

B. Problem Statement

An increasing number of important institutions of daily life such as, the education system and corporate office are designed to facilitate only one personality type. Examples include, open plan offices and traditional classrooms that discourage students from speaking freely. These biases stem from how people view different personalities or in other words how personhood is socially constructed. This problem affects both introverts and extroverts in varying forms in almost all cultures, and left unaddressed leads to an inefficient use of human talent and energy. Therefore, the objective of this research was to understand how undergraduates of Colombo, Sri Lanka perceive introverts and extroverts in order to draw conclusions about how these perceptions may be

causing the formation of stereotypes and other challenges.

C. Rationale

The significance of this study is threefold:

1. It explores the ways in which the population perceive introverts and extroverts.
2. It creates awareness of the oppressing effects of social constructions of personality, and lays a foundation for their ultimate transformation.
3. It seeks to make an empirical contribution to existing knowledge about introversion and extroversion in Sri Lanka.

As for why this issue is worth being studied in Sri Lanka, it is because as a nation subject to heavy westernization Sri Lanka is prone to imitate the same extrovert bias present in western cultures. This study will also not only be a precautionary action taken to prevent Sri Lankan culture from potentially imitating the same bias of western cultures, but that these problems already exist in the Sri Lankan context up to a certain degree. For example, open plan office spaces that bring in high stimulation and classroom teaching methods that call for excessive group activity, active class participation, many brainstorming sessions etc. are already present in both the education and office cultures of Sri Lanka, without any consideration to their disadvantages, particularly to introverts but also to extroverts, since extroverts too require a certain amount of solitude for creativity etc.

D. Main Research Questions

How do undergraduates in Colombo, Sri Lanka perceive introversion and extroversion and how do these perceptions contribute to the formation of stereotypes and other challenges unique to the two personality types?

E. Specific Research Questions

1. How do the participants conceptualize introversion and extroversion and what indicators of these do they look for being exhibited by people?
2. What personality traits do participants infer to introverts and extroverts?
3. What are the participants perceptions of how introversion and extraversion relates to career and academic success?

Methodology and Experimental Design

A. Research Approach, Population and Sample

A purely qualitative, inductive research approach was used. This was mainly due the positivism of a mixed or quantitative approach being unable to account for how the social reality is shaped and maintained, or how people interpret their actions and others (Blaikie, 2007).

The population taken for this study were the undergraduates of Colombo, Sri Lanka, studying in universities under the private sector, universities under the University Grant Commission of Sri Lanka (UGC) and Other Government Universities in Sri Lanka which are not under UGC. The sample for data collection was selected using Purposive sampling. Since this research was directed at assessing the public or general perception among the participants, a diverse variety of participants were looked for in order to gain as robust an insight as possible into the perception of introversion and extroversion, with equal numbers of participants from the three types of universities considered. Bearing in mind Sandelowski's suggestion that, in in-depth approaches a sample which is very large does not permit the deep, case-oriented analysis and Boddy's recommendation that any qualitative sample size over 30 (per market/geography) becomes too unwieldy

to administer and analyse the sample size has been kept to a limited 21 (Sandelowski, 1995) (Boddy, 2016).

B. Data collection and data analysis methods

The data gathering of this study was done using semi-structured interviews with 21 participants. An interview schedule with open-ended questions was used. However, the interview schedule was not strictly adhered to and questions were asked in the order that was felt as most suitable as the interview progressed.

It was understood prior to data collection that most participants did not have a proper understanding of the terms "introvert" and "extrovert". Therefore, in order to avoid any biases that could be caused due to misconceptions of the given terms, it was decided to explain the terms at the beginning of the interview. Furthermore, for this explanation the definitions given by Carl Jung and Susan Cain for introversion and extroversion were used.

The thematic analysis method was used for data analysis, and research ethics were addressed by protecting privacy and anonymity by using consent forms, securely storing recordings and transcripts, and avoiding the use of the names of interviewees.

Results

A. Qualitative Data Analysis

The data was analysed by first transcribing the interviews, coding them, and categorizing and deriving themes. The analysis below is presented under the main themes derived.

1) Conceptualization of Introversion and Extroversion:

Participants definitions of the terms introvert and extrovert based solely on their own knowledge: *10 out of the 21*

participants, said they had not heard the terms “introvert” and “extrovert” (in Sinhala or English) earlier and did not answer the question. Out of the participants who did answer the question, most of them referred to the social aspect of an individual when defining the terms. Out of them a considerable amount of the answers, such as the example given below, bare resemblance to definitions similar to that of Carl Jung and other definitions found in scientific literature.

An introvert is someone who does not gain energy from being around people. An extrovert is someone who gains energy from being around people.” – Interviewee 8

The other ways in which the participants described the word “introvert” were by making no references to the social aspect of a person and second, as people who are less open. The non-social aspect related characteristics describing the term introvert were thoughtful, independent, empathetic and “a person who doesn’t let other bring them down”; while they were described as less open as, people who do not show their emotions very freely, and as people who you take time to get to know. “Extrovert” was defined as a person who is social, expresses himself and works well in groups. Same as for “introvert”, some participants took special effort to attribute an extrovert being a social person to their temperament, a choice they have made or a need they have to be social, while other participants did not.

Participants’ thoughts about introverts and extroverts after the terms introvert and extrovert were explained according to definitions given by Jung and Cain:

The main characteristics, traits and behaviors used to describe **extroverts** could be categorized under the themes of those related to being social, those possibly inferring kindness, those related to being well-rounded individuals, those about

group work, those which explained physical behaviors and those which are commonly thought of as negative characteristics to possess. The most common terms used to describe extroverts were those **related to being social**; and they included, talking a lot, liking to be among people, being outgoing, easy to talk to, easy to be friends with, liking to meet new people, being active on social media and engaging in a multiple number of activities. It could be seen that many participants associated behaviors such as smiling a lot, not holding grudges, showing affection and being childlike all traits that generally suppose **kindness**, with extroversion. Another observation was that traits which are **related to being a well-rounded individual** were associated with extroverts. They included, descriptions of having the confidence to work alone despite usually working well in groups, being considered as having high self-esteem and confidence and engaging in many activities. In addition to those, terms such as ‘flexible’ and ‘balanced’ were also used. Another characteristic participants used to describe extroverts, is as people who have the ability to **work well in groups**. They thought extroverts are good team players, who can get along and work well with others. Behaviors and traits which are usually thought of as **negative** used to describe extroverts were listening less, not paying attention to detail, finding it difficult to live alone, needing people to be at their most creative and innovative and being demanding, and being bland.

The main characteristics, traits and behaviors used to describe **introverts** could be categorized under the themes of those related to being less social, those related to being independent, those related to being bad at team work and good at individual work, those which are positive and can loosely be categorized under humanity, and those associating mental

health related conditions. The most common way of describing introverts was as **being less social** or unsocial. Characteristics used for description were, being less outgoing, not having many friends, keeping to themselves, liking not going out, needing alone time, being better in one-on-one conversations, being lonely, living in their own worlds and being people who require a lot of time to really get to know. Introverts were also described as being opinionated, independent, able to do things by themselves and not needing help from others which are all characteristics which infer a sense of **independence**. Another recurring theme seen in how the participants described introverts is, a reference to how they are good at **working alone** or by themselves, and not as capable of working in groups. The greatly **positive characteristics** that are linked in general to humanity, associated with introversion are loyalty to friends, thoughtfulness, being understanding and attentiveness.

A recurring theme about introverts, were references to **mental health related conditions**. Associations were made with fear, self-loathing, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and loneliness. Other examples include, describing introverts as people who critique themselves very harshly and ones who might be having a fear of being let down. Here, it is important to note that no associations were made with mental health when participants described extroversion. Another observation is that, there were indications of acknowledging in some way certain underlying negative views of introversion and extroversion that society has. For example, one participant started an answer by saying,

“I don’t think introvert behaviours are a weakness” – Interviewee 21

Here for him to say so, without being prompted in anyway by a previous question or a comment or any such thing

hinting that introverted behaviours are a weakness, he has to be referring to something he considers to be a norm in society. Another participant, while answering the question of what sort of people he thinks extroverts are mentioned that,

“Extroverts might be misjudged as careless.” – Interviewee 7

Here, he believes that society quite wrongly perceives extroverts as careless.

Another observation is that certain participants have had a tendency to make justifications when speaking of what they see as negative behaviors of introverts and extroverts. An attempt at being understanding with a hint of sympathy is seen.

Participants views on what it is like to work with introverts and extroverts separately:

In general, it could be seen that participants had mostly positive things to say about their experiences of working with extroverts, except one participant who felt extroverts can be domineering. The main themes seen here were, extroverts being easier to get along with, more straightforward, more capable of making the people around them work, and being reliable, honest and trustworthy. Most participants thought it is not just easy, but comparatively easier to get along with and in general work with extroverts than introverts. It was seen that they also associate qualities such as being friendly and respecting of others decisions with extroverts. They are also perceived as people who are straightforward in stating their opinions and as people who value unity and have the skill to make a group of people work, while also being able to solve issues with cooperation. Some traits that are not related to being social such as being, trustworthy, honest and understanding were also attributed to extroverts.

On the other hand, introverts were viewed in a different and not very favorable manner to work with. Except for one interviewee who thought introverts could be trusted to get a certain task completed, all other participants had negative things to say about working with introverts. They were mostly those implying negativity, and could be broadly categorized as not being expressive enough, being difficult to work in groups and more suited for individual work, keep their opinions and talents to themselves, and harder to get along with.

“On the other hand, I have seen that more introverted people only prioritize their work and wants to get their work done fast. I also feel that if a mistake happens an introvert would tend to react more aggressively whereas an extrovert will work with everyone to resolve the matter.”
– Interviewee 3

As seen above, participants also see introverts as less of team players, selfish, unfriendly and better working by themselves than in groups.

The ways in which participants perceive an extrovert’s strengths and weaknesses:

The main strengths of being an extrovert are being social (meaning they perceive being social, as a strength) and having good communication skills, being cooperative when working with others, being well liked and being able to take leadership, and in some way or another believed that extroverts are social, have many friends, are good speakers, can be persuasive, and are good at working with other people. Several participants also thought that an advantage of being extroverted is that you will be well liked by others and society in general. It is seen in the following example, “They’re labelled as normal people.” – Interviewee 21

The main weaknesses participants saw in extroverts are that they might be too social

in situations that do not require it and might end up being a bother to others, less able to maintain close relationships since they have many friends, bad at keeping secrets, and might not put in a lot of effort and thought to work.

Introverts in contrast, were attributed a completely different set of qualities as their strengths and weaknesses. As for strengths, the main points brought up by participants are, they are very capable of focusing on a given task, paying attention to it and ensuring a well-done job, they can maintain very close relationships the people they associate, and can be trusted with secrets.

As for weaknesses of an introvert, or the disadvantages of introversion, the main points highlighted by the participants were, that they are not well liked by others, they cannot work well with others, they are not good at being social, their skills and talents are hidden and hence of no use, finding it difficult to build relationships, having fewer friends, not expressing their skills and abilities to the world with some participants even stating that introversion has more disadvantages than advantages.

They are further elaborated in the following examples,

“An introvert will suffer from the weakness of not being able to work with others.” – Interviewee 3

“It’s hard to say that introverts have much strengths. They may excel in certain things which need a lot of thought but in most cases whatever strengths they have won’t be of use to society if they won’t work with others.” - Interviewee 5

“When you’re introverted, you won’t know many people, you won’t know how to even get help from another person. And in reality, it is very hard to work on anything by yourself. But if you’re social, there’re more chances for you to get help from others.” - Interviewee 20

2) *Trait Inference to Introversion and Extroversion*: Almost all of the participants interviewed mentioned qualities or traits that are related to being less social as ones they think are possessed by an introvert. It was concluded that some of the main traits attributed to introverts coming under being less social, include being shy, quiet, keeping to themselves, not talking much, being reserved, not being friendly, not being outgoing, working alone that in groups, staying by themselves etc. Other common trait participants said would be seen in an introvert is seriousness, thoughtfulness, less humorous, guarded, not relaxed, and scared. It was also observed that there was a repetition of certain negative traits such as being selfish, proud and less confident in the answers of multiple participants. For instance,

“They are a little selfish. Might not be so all the time, but about 90% of the time they come off as selfish. They can be insensitive too. When you work in a group you’ll learn to care for others, but when you perform individually you won’t care for others as long as you’re doing alright. So, they might have a bit of selfishness and insensitivity too. Their self-motivators. They might even think I can produce better results working alone than in a group with the others and motivate themselves through that.” - Interviewee 20

On the other hand, almost all of the participants interviewed mentioned qualities or traits that are related to being very social as ones they think are possessed by an extrovert. It can be seen below,

“In a group of people the extroverts would be the really loud, social, active ones, who are always cracking jokes and trying to make people laugh.” - Interviewee 8

Other traits attributed to extroverts by the participants were having confidence, being energetic, being bubbly, being happy, being experienced, being straightforward, being

funny and humorous, being sensitive and emotional, being kind, humble and helpful and being fun-loving. It can also be noted that no traits that are necessarily deemed as negative traits to have were attributed to extroverts.

3) *Association of Introversion and Extroversion with Academic and Career Success*: It was seen that participants thought of introverts as better suited for jobs, that are done individually, jobs that require attention to detail and confidentiality.

They saw them as being capable of focusing on the job and performing the given task well. However, they also thought that introverts would not be very successful career wise in jobs that require group work. In fact, the main weakness they saw in introverts in the workplace is that they are unfriendly, less open, less approachable and generally less appealing to work with, work for or work under.

As for extroverts, many participants believed that they are better suited for jobs with team work and will be capable of leadership roles, especially ones that require rallying and motivating people. They also thought they would be easier to talk to, more understandable and approachable work colleagues. It was also seen that extroverts were perceived to have better networking skills, persuasive powers and communication skills in the workplace.

Conclusion

A) *Key research findings*

The main findings of this study were that in terms of conceptualization of introversion and extroversion, participants viewed them mainly under the aspect of how social they are. They perceived introverts to be less social and extroverts as more social. Other ways in which they perceived introverts are as being independent, bad at

group work, better at individual work and thoughtful, attentive and loyal individuals. Negative perceptions they had of introverts were that they are selfish, hard to work with, unapproachable, having mental health related issues. On the other hand, extroverts were seen as more social individuals with good communication skills who are easy to work with, well rounded and approachable. Negative perceptions about them were that they are demanding, less attentive, do not pay attention to detail, bland, and less able to adapt to living alone

In terms of trait inferences, extroverts were seen as again social, fun, energetic, funny, relaxed and active, while introverts were seen as reserved, quiet, selfish, independent, tense and serious.

In terms of career success, it was perceived that extroverts are better for positions in groups and leadership more appealing to work in many aspects. Introverts were thought of as better working by themselves and overall more capable of doing a task well, with more focus and attention to detail.

B) Limitations of the research

Lack of prior researches done on the topic was a limitation faced. It was required that this study be exploratory in nature rather than explanatory, as well as for an entirely new research design to be created. Most of the theoretical perspectives and previous research findings not being from very recent times was another limitation.

Additionally, the nature of the sample is also a limitation. Firstly, they are undergraduates and hence of a particular level of literacy which may not be representative of another special or ordinary group. Secondly, the sample consists of students who study in Colombo only and hence does not necessarily represent the perceptions of undergraduates hailing from or living in a particular district.

C) Recommendations of the research

According to the findings of the study it is seen that participants perceive introverts and extroverts in certain ways and that they have constructed certain stereotypes of them. These perceptions are not always true, since as seen in research extroverts do not necessarily need less talking or quiet and peace to concentrate and perform well (Geen R. G., 1984). The prevalence of these perceptions become disadvantageous in environments such as classrooms where extroverted students are reprimanded for being too interactive or when people skills and networking is given all the importance, and as a result natural introvert tendencies to perform to their potential when being by themselves are hampered. Therefore, the recommendation of this study is to not let the stereotypes, the misconceptions and the social constructions we have of personality types, give way to situations where we see qualities of only one personality type as favorable, and hence create systems and build environments that facilitate the efficient functioning of only one personality type, while another two thirds to half of the population are left struggling to function in an environment that goes against all of their inherent needs (such as a need for less stimulation or a need for more stimulation from the environment), ultimately resulting in an enormous wastage of energy, potential and efficiency.

D) Suggestions for future research

Future studies will benefit by conducting similar research on a larger and more widespread population sample that covers all age groups and areas of residence and by focusing on how these perceptions or stereotypes affect the classroom environments and work spaces of Sri Lankans, and what can be done to correct such issues in the system if they do exist.

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank my supervisor Dr. (Mrs.) LS Liyanage for her expertise and sincere and valuable guidance and encouragement, and my lecturers Dr. WMAGHA Premarathne, Dr. (Mrs.) KKNP Rathnayake, Mr. HMN Herath and Ms. HMAGK Ekanayake for their guidance throughout this assignment. I would like to acknowledge the administrative staff of the Faculty of Management, Social Sciences and Humanities for their assistance. I am also thankful to my family for their inspiration and encouragement, and my friends and colleagues for their unfailing support.

References

- Blaikie, N. (2007). *Approaches to social enquiry (2nd ed.)*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Boddy, C. R. (2016). Sample size for qualitative research. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 4(19), 426-432.
- Cain, S. (2012, June 19). The power of the introvert in your office. (D. Rousmaniere, Interviewer) Harvard Business Review.

Geen, R. G. (1984). Preferred Stimulation Levels in Introverts and Extraverts: Effects on Arousal and Performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1303-1312.

Hampson, S. E. (1988). *The Construction of Personality: An Introduction (2nd ed.)*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Jung, C. (1995). *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. London: Fontana Press.

Sandelowski, M. (1995). Sample size in qualitative research. *Research in nursing and health*, 18(2), 179-183.

Author Biography



The corresponding author has completed a BSc in Social Sciences from the General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (KDU) in 2019, and Dr. LS Liyanage is a senior lecturer of the Department of Social Sciences at KDU.