

The Wonder of Interpersonal Relationships I: Push and Pull

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Relationships are important. This seems obvious—there is now substantial evidence from a major longitudinal study (Waldinger and Schulz, 2023) that enriching relationships are often the most important contributor to happiness. As researchers (and therapists), Waldinger and Schulz (2023, p. 104) have concluded that:

. . . human beings are social creatures; in essence this simply means that each of us as individuals cannot provide everything we need for ourselves. We can't confide in ourselves, romance ourselves, mentor ourselves, or help our move a sofa. We need others to interact with and to help us, and we flourish when we provide that same connection and support to others. This process of giving and receiving is the foundation of a meaningful life. How we feel about our social universe is directly related to the kinds of things we are receiving from and giving to other people.

While relationships may be critical to our happiness, they can also be quite elusive. In some societies (such as that found in Japan) the personal need for relationships in contemporary times seems to be of much lower priority than other personal needs (such as full control over one's world via reliance on the Internet and creation of one's own identity via an avatar). Waldinger and Schultz (2023, p. 71) point not just to the *hikiko-mori* (pulling inward) of Japanese youth but also to the young adults of Spain (NiNi: don't study and don't work) and the United Kingdom (NEET: not in education, employment or training). Even in Waldinger and Schulz' study, many people identified or acted consistently on behalf of happiness-promoting factors other than relationships -- such as money and status.

The move to a fuller understanding and appreciation of relationships seems to be particularly timely right now because there appears to be a new awareness of and emphasis on the factors that lead to satisfying relationships—including my own book on enduring intimate relationships (Bergquist, 2023). I can point further to several books that have recently been published which review and summarize the psychological and neurobiological research on friendships (Denworth, 2020). It isn't easy making friends in a mid-21st Century world that is filled with many challenges and sources of stress and anxiety (Bergquist, 2020). Friendships are also hard to establish and maintain in a life filled with multiple, conflicting priorities. There are too few hours for connection with anyone other than members of one's immediate family—and even the available hours for family are limited.

At the other end of the relationship spectrum, we find a renewed focus on the psychology of loneliness (e.g. Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008). In the past, the study of loneliness has often been founded on neo-Marxist attention to alienation. Recent studies have tended to focus on the impact which digital technology (and the Internet in particular) has had on the sense of personal (and collective) loneliness. Production machines and automation helped to create the alienation during the 19th and 20th Century

that has been associated with loneliness. Now the digital “machines” and Internet have produced the loneliness of the 21st Century.

The Relationship Spectrum

In this essay, I wish to focus on both ends of the relationship spectrum. We find that there is loneliness and the accompanying push away from relationships at one end of the spectrum. At the personal level, this push might relate to the Introversion trait that Carl Jung (1971) has portrayed—though one form of Introversion concerns a focus on a few very important relationships rather than the push away from all relationships. At the societal level, this push is represented by a fancy German term: *Gesellschaft*. In a *Gesellschaft*-based society, primary concerns are directed toward practical matters and to groups and associations that preserve individual identity and freedom. Personal achievement is acknowledged and rewarded. People can be outstanding in their life endeavors. Impersonal and formal relationships prevail. It is “all about business”.

At the level of family, the push is represented in the disengagement found in many contemporary families. Members of the family end up spending very little time with one another. This is either representative of families being a low priority in a world filled with conflicting demands, or representative of a specific cultural factor (found in some societies) that places lower value on family than other groupings. At the societal level, we find the push represented in what Robert Sommers (1969) and other environmental psychologists identify as socio-fugal forces (ranging from societal norms to architectural design).

The pull end of the relationship spectrum is represented at the personal level by the Jungian trait called extraversion. Once again, there are multiple interpretations of this trait, only one of which offers a portrait of the extravert as wanting always to be with other people. At the societal level, there is another German word that labels this condition—it is *Gemeinschaft* and represents a primary concern for community and society. Emphasis is placed on commitments to shared goals and on the basic need to care for other people. Identity in *Gemeinschaft*-based societies is founded on shared and collective identities. It is not acceptable to be “outstanding” as an individual. We are outstanding as a group or institution. As one of my Asian colleagues had reminded me, to be “outstanding” in his society is to “stand outside” of the group—which in turn means to be socially isolated and even ostracized.

At the family level, we find the pull represented at the extreme by the state of enmeshment. Members of the family are “in each other’s hair” all the time. Regular phone calls (or texting) occur to ensure constant contact and monitoring among family members. Everyone’s behavior is interwoven with everyone else’s behavior within the family. Once again, cultural factors often play a major role in encouraging (or even demanding) close family ties.

At the societal level (*Gemeinschaft*), we find socio-petal forces which bring people together—based once again on a number of factors ranging from social norms to the configuration of buildings and the space between buildings (plazas, parks, commons, etc.) and the arrangement of classroom. Work-related relationships are also personal relationships. Business is conducted with an emphasis at first on

“getting to know” one another and building shared trust. This in turn often means an exchange of gifts, several dinners together or even a long period of time in which personal information is shared. One does not just “leap into” business-related issues.

Given this multi-level distinction between relational push and pull, I will explore several of the ramifications associated with each. I begin by offering a collective perspective on relationships—noting that there are two different kinds of relationships (transactional and autotelic). I then adopt a personal perspective—noting that there are two different orientations toward relationships (Introversion and Extraversion).

Type of Relationships: Transactional and Autotelic

There is a fundamental distinction to be drawn that helps to define the nature of interpersonal relationships and the reasons why we relate to other people. This distinction concerns the reason(s) why we enter into relationships with other people.

Transactional Relationships

There are transactional (or instrumental) relationships through which strong relationships can be formed. They prevail in a *Gesellschaft* society where “practical” relationships are of greatest concern. Two busy people find a good “excuse” to work together and find that there is mutual benefit in the formation of this relationship. Each of them is responsive to the distinctive need(s) of the other person—even if these needs differ significantly from their own.

The two participants in a transactional relationship are able to set aside time (in their jammed schedule) to meet together—sometimes even in person. At least initially, their reason to meet is instrumental in nature. They both wish to achieve some goal with the assistance of their colleague. It might be an opportunity to meet in some wonderful spot where they can collaborate in person – a spa in California, a seaside resort in Cancun, a mountain cabin in Oregon. What better “reason” to enjoy good company at a great location. Much can be done when lounging on a deck while chatting about the outlines of a new book – there might even be an audio recorder to pick up the conversation. If a “business” trip to the seacoast isn’t feasible, then the conversation might take place via Zoom—with this constructive interaction being recorded.

On the surface, this might look like a relationship in which there is what the behavioral economists call a “market exchange.” However, this rather rigid definition does not accurately capture what is occurring. Genuine affection is shared among the “colleagues” who are working on the project together. There are often memorable dinners, a bottle of wine and some moments of reflection on personal matters (family, career, new loves, etc.) It is much more than economics or even business. It is a deep relationship that is forged about a shared love of a joint project – not unlike two parents who share a love for their child.

Autotelic Relationships

The second kind of relationship is one that might best be called “pure” or “unencumbered.” There is no widely accepted term to describe this relationship. I consider it to be an “autotelic” relationship. I use this term because “autotelic” refers to an activity that is self-rewarding. It contains its own internal goal.

This type of relationship prevails in a Gemeinschaft society in which shared welfare is of great importance. There is no such thing as “just business.”

“Autotelic” is often used to label playful activities that seem to have no ulterior motive. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) writes about the “flow” experience that is inherent in many autotelic activities. I would propose that autotelic relationships are likely to manifest this “flow.” We are sitting with a dear friend and time seems to fly by (much as it does when we are playing a riveting game of chess or clinging to a mountain wall that one is climbing). The “flow” might also come from the often surprising (and even challenging) comments or actions being taken by one or both friends. Spontaneity might keep the relationship alive and vitally engaging. Flow might also show up in the sometimes “daring” disclosure that takes place. We share something with our friend that we would never share with anyone else.

Most importantly, an experience of Flow seems to be contained and isolated. Nothing else matters or gains our attention. We are in a whole new world when reading a book that enthralls us or when dancing to an intoxicating beat or highly romantic melody. We are dancing to the sounds and rhythms of a sleep band. It is a warm summer evening beside a swimming pool in Bermuda. We are sitting on a bench watching and listening to the thundering fall of water over a cliff of the Columbia River gorge between the state of Washington and Oregon. The Multnomah Falls leaves us spellbound and living for a few moments in a frozen and isolated space and time. This is flow. We are fortunate to be sharing this dance in Bermuda or the Multnomah Falls bench with a dear friend. There is nothing more precious than this “flowing” relationship without external goal or function.

Introversion: The Push Away from Interpersonal Relationships

I shift my reflections on the push and pull of relationships by turning in more depth to Carl Jung’s (1971) wisdom regarding intrapsychic dynamics and preferences. He identifies a personality type called “introversion” which suggests a turning inward and pushing back against interpersonal engagements. Actually, the dynamics of introversion (and extraversion) are much more complex and nuanced than this simple description.

Energy and the General

First, the distinction between introversion and extraversion is based in part on the expenditure of energy. For the Introvert, engagement in interpersonal relationships requires the expenditure of considerable energy. There is sheer exhaustion at the end of a day filled with other people (especially those who are not closely related to the Introvert). A good night of sleep or a peaceful period of time reading a book, listening to relaxing music, or enjoying a wonderfully cooked meal with a loved one is restorative.

Introversion can be portrayed as a strategy regarding the display of self. A metaphor is often used to describe this display. Imagine the general of a large army, the general’s aide, and a large tent. In the case of the introvert, we find that the person standing in front of the tent is not the general. Rather it is the aide who is pretending to be the general. The actual general remains inside the tent, devoting himself to preparing and modifying the comments that are to be made in the address to the troops. He

is handing notes out to the aide, who delivers them with great skill and gusto to the troops. All of this means, that we are never quite sure when interacting with an Introvert that we are interacting with the “real” person or with an “impersonator” (with the real person being hidden behind this “shell person.”)

Jungians write about the “persona” (mask) that we all carry with us when interacting with other people in our world. This mask hides the “real self”—whether we are introverted or extraverted. However, there is often a mask within a mask for the Introvert. Furthermore, truly gifted Introverts have a second or third mask that enables other people to believe that NO mask exists. They are interacting with a genuinely open person. Those who interact with the gifted Introvert often do not realize that this person is not really outgoing and not anywhere near being an Extravert. The Introvert can be a great actor and impersonator on any interpersonal stage.

A wonderful example of this impersonation is to be found among those who actually engage in acting on a stage or in a movie (who are inclined to be Introverts). We witness skilled actors such as Grace Kelly, Clint Eastwood and Harrison Ford playing a specific role. We are led to believe that this is the real person. The actor can play the role with skill and understanding because they are operating inside their tent, using this “alone” time to do careful work. Similarly, we find that many gifted political figures (such as Abraham Lincoln) are Introverts, who are doing their work in the tent. We are hearing from and responding to the aide.

Depth and Arousal

Introversion is also concerned about depth (contrasting with the Extraversion focus on Breadth). As Marti Laney (2002, p. 21) concludes, introverts will limit their experiences—in part because they feel deeply about these experiences. They read a book slowly in order to savor all of the characters and the rich narrative. There is no digested version for them. Skim reading is not in their “line of work.” Friendships are often limited to a few people and a deep commitment is often made to “quality family life” (or at least some carefully thought-out moments of great depth and openness with family members. As Laney poetically observes, Introverts declare “how deep is the ocean!” They will dive to the deepest part of the sea (be it a relationship or a work of art).

It should also be noted, however, that it might not just be a matter of preferring depth to breadth. In his own somewhat different version of Introversion and Extraversion, the controversial psychologist, Hans Eysenck (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1969) proposed during the 1960s that the differences in behavior of an Extravert and Introvert can be attributed to their handling of cortical arousal. He points to the Ascending Reticular Activity System (ARAS) as the culprit. Introverts have a higher base level of ARAS activation than Extraverts—making them more vulnerable to any outside experiences that increase activation. In essence, Introverts lack sufficient buffers to block the external stimuli. They must be selective about what they attend to outside themselves because they can easily be overwhelmed by what comes in unimpeded. The ARAS is “trigger-happy.” Words become shouts and sights become blinding images.

Extraversion: The Pull Toward Interpersonal Relationships

When we turn to Carl Jung’s exploration of the personality type that he identifies as “Extraversion” we find a quite different source and use of energy and a quite different strategy for presentation of self.

The Extravert is energized (not exhausted) after a day of many meetings and interpersonal engagements. On the other hand, to sit down and read a book may be exhausting, as is the time spent listening patiently to music. The dinner with a loved one is precious – but it might be even better if some other folks are invited to join in.

Breadth and Arousal

I return to another distinction I draw between Introversion and Extraversion. It concerns breadth versus depth. The Extravert is likely to reach out for diversity of perspective and practice. This person seeks to “gobble up” the world with which they are interacting. As Marti Laney (2002, p. 22) has noted, “extroverts like to experience a lot [breadth], and introverts like to know a lot about what they experience [depth].” The declaration for Extraverts is “how wide is the sky!”

Once again, we can expand on the Jungian interpretation. This gobbling up of experiences might be a result of what Hans Eysenck (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1969) suggests is the capacity of Extraverts (unlike Introverts) to take in external input. Their initial ARAS level is lower. This being the case, then Extraverts need not fear (nor buffer) stimuli that will increase the arousal level of their ARAS. They can take in the noise and views from outside. I would suggest that Extraverts might even be lacking in the level of arousal that they most desire. The Extravert might need to increase the intensity and diversity of their experiences in order to get a “high” (peak levels of arousal) from these experiences. This need for greater intensity could be addictive in nature. As an Extravert I need a bigger and more exciting business deal (transactional) or an even more intense, emotionally saturated interpersonal relationship (perhaps even an elicit “affair”).

The General and Enmeshment

With regard to the general and aide, we find that the Extraverted General is standing there in front of the text. The troops are listening to the “real” thing. The aide remains in the tent and doesn’t have much to do (perhaps preparing some champagne for post-speech celebration). In real life, we are also like to find that the Extravert with whom we are relating is the “real thing.” Nothing is hidden. There is not a second (or third) personality hiding behind the personality with whom we are relating. The persona is in place without any secondary complications.

As we probe more deeply into the life of a person who leans toward Extraversion, we are likely to find some contributing factors that increase the full forward toward interpersonal engagement. As I have already noted, Extraversion tends to be aligned with an enmeshed family system or even enmeshed, sociopetal social system. Almost anyone who lives and works in an enmeshed environment that pulls forward toward interpersonal engagements will tend to spend a considerable amount of time with other people. Whether we like it or not, there is enormous pressure to “relate!” If we don’t then a fundamental social norm is being violated and we are either sent to “the penalty box” (ignored or socially isolated) or punished via gossip channels and warped narratives about who we are and what motivates us to remain “alone”.

I find that in my own work with Asian organizations located in Taiwan, Singapore, or Indonesia that the pull toward interpersonal engagement was quite strong. Evenings are often spent entertaining

customers or “celebrating” with co-workers. Family life is often reserved for the weekends. I find my work in these Extraverted societies to be exhausting for me as an Introvert. I often had to inform my clients that I needed some time off and that banquets every evening were quite thoughtful but not in the best interests of an organization that needs a fresh and focused consultant or trainer on the following morning.

While I am sure that Introverts live and work in these Extraverted societies, their mask is likely to be particularly thick and there may be many masks covering other masks. I actually have been closely acquainted with some strong Introverts in Asia and have had wonderful (and often quite candid) conversations with them regarding how they navigate an interpersonal-pulling world. It tends to begin with a sustained smile (friendly face) and head nods (Laney, 2002, p. 174). It follows in Asian society (and in Western society) with gestures of acknowledgement and appreciation (such as a tipping of the teacup or wine glass to a colleague during a banquet). Marti Laney (2002, p. 171) aligns with this tactic when she writes about “acting as if” we care about what is happening all around us.

Laney (2002, p. 170) also writes of a “sea anemone” tactic. Like an anemone, we find a place to sit and anchor ourselves rather than roaming around the room. We let other people come to us rather than reaching out to them. “Reactive” sociability is the key—in contrast to the “proactive” sociability of Extraverts (Schutz, 1994). I know that I sometimes operate like an anemone. I suspect that my Introverted Asian colleagues also engage this anchoring strategy. What I do know is that my Asian Introverts are truly skillful actors. They need to be skillful if they are to be successful in business or more generally in life.

Conclusions

In sum, it seems that Jung’s two personality types do have an important impact on the nature, extent and type of relationships that are being engaged. Introverts are likely to be very selective in their choice of other people with whom to establish a relationship. There has to be a very good reason to engage in either a transactional or autotelic relationship. For the introvert a transactional relationship is likely to be engaged if the project in which both people are involved is compelling. An autotelic relationship is engaged by an Introvert when it holds the potential of being deep and enduring.

Unlike the Introvert, an Extravert will tend to welcome and even seek out relationships. They have a large contact list or in 21st Century life and can speak proudly of having assembled a large “network.” They view a large email and texting list as well as an impressive number of linkages to be a sign of success. The prospect of a transactional relationship being attractive to someone who is an Extravert revolves around the potential for action and achievement. An autotelic relationship will be attractive to an Extravert if the other person appears to be interesting. They offer something new and different. The potential is there for an exciting (even unpredictable) relationship.

Distinctions between relational push and pull, transactional and autotelic, and Extraversion and Introversion have been drawn in this essay. I will shift my attention in the next two essays in this series to Loneliness (with the potential push of Introverts into this state), and Social Constructions (with the potential pull of Extraverts into an uncritical acceptance of these constructions). In the fourth essay of this series, I describe some of the conditions that lead to appropriate pull by both Extraverts and Introverts toward transactional and autotelic relationship. Specifically, I reflect on the creation and

maintenance of psychological containers, connections, and communities that produce what Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1985) identify as Coherence. I consider how this Coherence can be conceived (and produced) from both a secular and sacred perspective.

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