

# Introversion Unbound



*I gnash my teeth about getting introverts to present with more energy and impact. Sometimes I think it's wrong to try, and then I run across an article like this (about the work of psychologist Brian Little) which argues that we can "act out of character" if we are motivated by our deepest values to do so, and that "courage often means acting out of character", a good thought to keep in mind when preparing for an important presentation.*

## Is the personality fixed?

A century ago, psychoanalysts declared that the human personality was largely fixed by age five. More recently, biologically orientated psychologists have detected characteristic signs of temperament in infancy. Even so, personality psychologist Brian Little, lecturer in psychology and a former Radcliffe Institute fellow, is "wary of spurious genetic postulations and claims of a genetic basis for fixed traits." Another of psychology's pioneers, William James, M.D. 1869, asserted that our psychological traits are "set like plaster" by age 30. Little counters that James was "only 50 percent correct – we are half-plastered. There is a heavily genetic aspect to the first stratum of personality. But our brains evolved a neocortex, which enables us to override these biological impulses to act in a certain way."

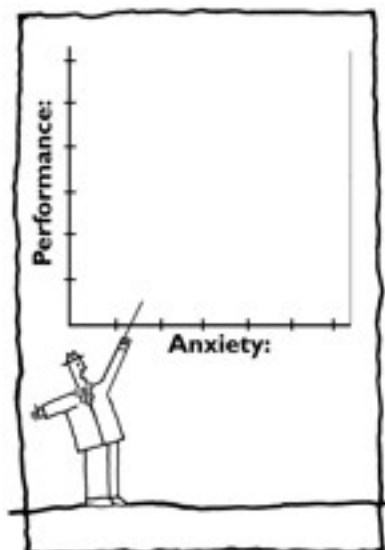
## The power of choice

In a series of papers and a forthcoming book, *Human Natures and Well Beings*, Little bucks

the current trend of biological determinism in psychology. He argues for the existence of "free traits": tendencies expressed by individual choice. Little ticks off the "Big Five" personality traits – openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism – and suggests thinking of them as musical notation. "Fixed traits are like a chord, five notes played at once," he explains. "But you need to extend personality temporally. Over time, traits might be expressed more like an arpeggio, with one or another note dominant at any given time."

## Shifting to another gear

Furthermore, Little argues that traits do not exist in the abstract, but are evoked in important ways by our "personal projects." He defines these commonsensically: personal projects are meaningful goals, both small and large, that can range from "put out the cat, quickly," to "transform Western thought, slowly." Individuals activate their free traits, expressing or stifling inborn tendencies, in service of "core projects" – the endeavors linked



**As your anxiety increases, so does your ability to perform... up to a certain point**

to their deepest values. “Out of love for our wives or kids or our professions, we enjoy ourselves to act ‘out of character,’” Little says. “For example, even though I’m a classic introvert, when I give a lecture for my students I perform with great passion. Introverts, when they are ‘on,’ become pseudo-extraverts. Can you tell the difference between a born extravert and a pseudo-extravert? Usually you cannot.”

Acting “out of character” can mean acting away from one’s character, but can also be behavior chosen on behalf of character, says Little, adding, “Character traits have an evaluative dimension, but personality traits are generally not evaluative.” (He notes that the Journal of Character and Personality evolved into the Journal of Personality, and asks, only half-kidding, When did we lose our character?)

## What cues do you look for in others?

Courage often means acting out of character. For examples, while extraverts seek out reward cues, introverts, who have lower pain thresholds, instead tend to avoid punishment cues. “An introverted

kid in a soccer game who is kicked hard in the shin might show her pain and hear someone say, ‘Don’t be a wuss,’” says Little. “but the introvert who hobbles back onto the field with a tear in her eye is even more of a hero than the extravert – she’s acting out of character for the sake of her team.”

## The price we pay for being brave

Although free traits can advance core projects, prolonged periods of overriding one’s inborn temperament do take their toll. “It exacts a price in health, and can cause burnout – unless you have a restorative niche where you can indulge your first nature,” Little explains. “After an hour or two in front of a class, my introverted side restores itself by taking a quiet break in the washroom, or stepping outside for a breath of fresh air. With spouses and bosses, we can strike a bargain: “I’ll act out of character to advance our joint project if you will grant me a restorative niche. What we need is a Free Trait Agreement.”

*This article is taken largely from one written by Craig Lambert in Harvard Magazine, July-August 2003.*

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